

A Fortune from the Sky



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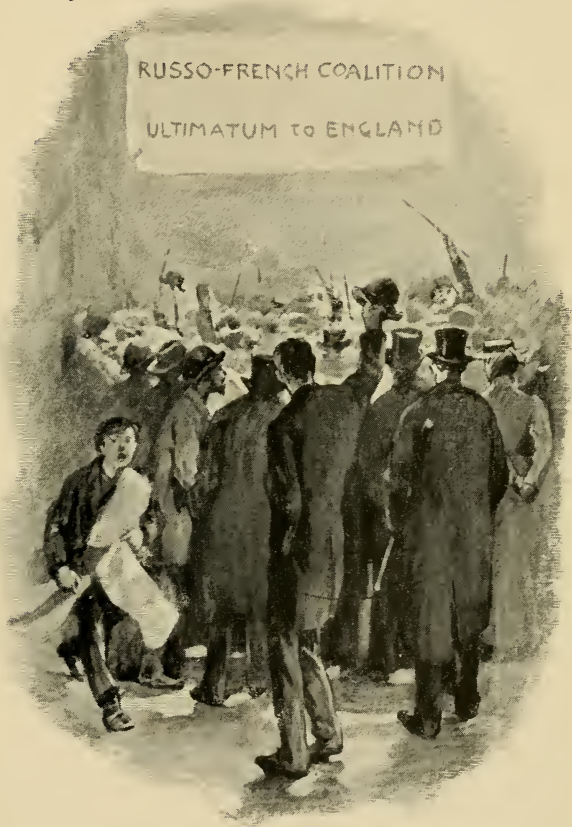
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A FORTUNE FROM THE SKY



"Fred saw his own name written in flame on the wall."

a Fortune from the Sky



"In a few moments the crowd was cheering like mad."

Page 10.

- G. NELSON AND SONS -

A FORTUNE FROM THE SKY

BY

SKELTON KUPPORD

*Author of "The Uncharted Island," "Hammond's Hard Lines,"
&c., &c.*



THOMAS NELSON AND SONS

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A FORTUNE FROM THE SKY.

CHAPTER I.

“SOMETHING DONE TO EARN A NIGHT’S
REPOSE.”

SOMETHING of the kind had been expected for weeks, but it startled the crowd all the same. Every eye was fixed on the transparent plate on which the great London daily was good enough to expose all the latest news to anybody who cared to come all the way to Fleet Street to read it.

At first the crowd merely gazed at the bold black letters that showed up so clearly against the yellow light:—

<p>RUSSO-FRENCH COALITION. ULTIMATUM TO ENGLAND.</p>
--

By-and-by the strain became too great. Somebody began a feeble shout. This was welcomed as a pleasant relief. In a few moments the crowd was cheering like mad.

It was not that they were glad. They had, indeed, little cause for rejoicing, if there were any truth in what that very newspaper before whose office they were now standing had been dinning into the ears of the public for months. It was the old story—Britain unprepared for war, and her enemies more than ready. The crowd knew all this—they believed it, too—yet they shouted. After all, what was there to do? You cannot read news of this kind and say nothing; you are not going to read it and whine: there was nothing left, then, but to shout; and shout they did as enthusiastically as if they were really glad. It was the only way to express defiance of the combined nations.

If it were rash for the crowd in general to shout, it was surely rank folly for Fred Gurleigh to join in. But patriotism does not depend on the stake a man has in the country; if it did, one could hardly expect Fred to be patriotic. His stake amounted to exactly nothing at all. He possessed the clothes he stood in—nothing more.

Still, when the whole case is considered, it will be admitted that he had more right to cheer than most of that crowd. If the allied French and Russian armies were to land in London to-morrow, he was in a position to defy them. None of them would want his threadbare frock-coat, that by its suggestion of former respectability only intensified its wearer's present destitution. Not even a Russian scarecrow would have changed hats with him. His boots were past speaking about. He had no idea where he was to sleep that night; or, if he had an idea, he did not like it. All the same, he was not going to let the French and Russians interfere with his hearth and home—not if he could help it. Accordingly, he continued his cheering as lustily as the emptiness beneath his waistcoat permitted.

There was, after all, some method in his madness. He knew that this news would make a difference to him. Some months ago he had gladdened the heart of a recruiting-sergeant by asking for the imperial shilling. Things had not then reached their present low-water ebb either with Fred or with the nation; but if Fred looked better then than now, he did not look quite well enough to satisfy the exacting regimental doctor, who discovered that there was some-

thing unofficial about Fred's anatomy. His astragalus, it appeared, did not obey all the rules laid down for it in doctors' books; and, as a consequence, this regimental doctor was sure that Fred could not stand long marches, and was therefore of no use to the government. Fred, who did not even know that he had an astragalus, but who did know that he had been walking for the past three years at an average of over twelve miles a day, was surprised and disgusted at this unexpected rejection. The sergeant, who was as disappointed as his recruit, did his best to comfort him.

"Cheer up, my lad; you just wait till the war's declared, and they'll jump at you. What does that old white owl know about marching, anyway?"

The war had now been practically declared, so Fred had resolved to give the authorities an early opportunity of jumping at him. He would have gone straight off to the office, but he knew that it was long past office hours. Still, it made a difference to him to know that to-morrow he would be almost certain to have a roof over his head again. That day he had looked critically at the Thames several times, but had felt that the time had not yet come to consider the Thames seriously.

As he turned away from the newspaper office, before which there was still a crowd, but now a quiet one, he felt that a new era was beginning for him, or, at any rate, would begin for him next morning. He should have liked very much if it could have seen its way to begin at once; but as that was out of the question, he tightened his belt, and tried not to notice the savoury smells that came out of the cooking places he had to pass.

"If it comes to forced marches on an empty stomach," muttered Fred to himself, "there will be few better trained men in the British army."

As he wandered along the busy streets, shivering a little, though none but a hungry man could have felt anything but a pleasant freshness in the October air, he naturally began to review his life in London for the past three years. He usually tried to avoid thinking of this very thing; but to-morrow he hoped a new chapter would begin, so he found a certain pleasure in recalling the miseries which he now believed to be quite left behind him.

He had come to London at the ridiculously early age of nineteen. He had no friends in town, but then he had no friends at home either, unless you can call an exceedingly severe uncle a friend. He had

lived with his uncle, and had paid sixteen shillings a week, by way of board, out of the eighteen shillings he earned as clerk in the newspaper office of his native town in the Midlands.

Fred was a clever fellow in many ways—perhaps not quite so clever as he thought himself in those early days, but still clever enough to want to better himself. He particularly wanted to “see life.” His face grew very grim this evening as he remembered this early desire, and the speed and thoroughness with which it had been gratified.

Everybody knows that London is the place to see life—in this island, at all events—but everybody who knows this does not have a chance of going to London thrown at him just when the desire is strongest. This happened to Fred. He replied to an advertisement in a London paper. The advertiser wanted a young man, “of prepossessing appearance and good address, as confidential clerk.” The advertiser further expressed his preference for a candidate from the country, and offered a salary of three pounds a week. Fred had plenty of good recommendations and a fairly good photograph, so he was able to satisfy the London man, who wrote to him to come and take up duties at once.

You must carefully compare eighteen shillings with three pounds before you can hope to have the smallest idea of what this letter meant for Fred, and after that you must add the joy of seeing life. Even then you have not reached anything like a true estimate of the joy that brimmed over in Fred's experience; for you cannot really enter into the joy of escaping from Uncle Josiah's stern rule, unless, indeed, you have an Uncle Josiah of your own, in which case the more lightly we pass over the matter the better.

There was a farewell supper, at three and sixpence a head, given by Fred's fellow-clerks, and strongly condemned by Uncle Josiah, who growled that it would have been much better if they had handed over the three-and-sixpences to Fred instead of making hogs of themselves, which was his way of describing anything in the way of what the Americans call a square meal.

However, everything was over at last. Quite a crowd of envious young men accompanied Fred to the midnight mail to London, and saw him off in grand style.

He could never forget the feelings of tumultuous joy that kept him awake that night when the other five passengers ostentatiously began and noisily con-

tinued to sleep. The world was before him ; life was in sight ; he had over twenty pounds in his pocket-book. Of this enormous sum he could hardly think without rising in his seat. But when he thought of the three pounds every week, he really had to get up and shake himself.

When he reached the scene of his future greatness in Queen Victoria Street, he was a little awed by the grandeur of the office. There was a porter in uniform, a message boy, and himself. Mr. Wallaby-Jones, the great man, looked his part. Fred had never seen a white waistcoat like his before, and the watch chain that traversed it was a thing to dream over.

At first Fred thought that his work was to be purely ornamental. He had a good deal of "witnessing" to do. He used to be called in to the great man's room steadily, to do nothing but write the words, "Fred Gurleigh, Witness." But he soon found that he had a great deal to do in the way of sending out circulars about various kinds of companies. He was a little astonished at the number of different things his master was connected with ; but he was kept so busy—working overtime almost every night—that he had little time to speculate.

His first real disappointment came at the end of the first week. He very naturally expected his first three pounds; but no mention was made of this, to him, essential part of his new life. It is true that he did not actually need the money; but he was not at all comfortable at having spent so much without having brought in anything. Not only had his landlady's bill astonished him—think of a jump from sixteen shillings to thirty-one and six—but he had been incited by certain hints from the great man to spend large sums in making a good appearance. The largest item was five pounds for a diamond ring; after all, he would make more than its price in a fortnight.

His first Sunday, after the blank Saturday, was not of the pleasantest. He felt that he should have asked his money, and was a little ashamed that he had lacked the necessary courage. He resolved, at least, that he would keep down his expenses in his lodgings, and had a very disagreeable interview with his landlady. Her explanation of the costliness of her arrangements was particularly galling. She wouldn't have spent quite so much on his account if it hadn't been that she "thought he was a gentleman." It was hard to bear; but this time, at least,

he was firm. Gentleman or not gentleman, the bill had to be smaller next week.

On the following Saturday Fred had screwed himself up to the asking point, and was determined to demand his money. He had, by what he considered extremely skilful side questions, discovered that both the boy and the porter had received their money on the previous Saturday, so it could not be the mere custom of the office to pay monthly.

Maybe Mr. Wallaby-Jones read the question in his eye. In any case, he contrived to make a very hurried exit to catch his train, leaving a flowing stream of instructions behind him as he went.

Fred was not to be shaken off. On the following Monday he had returned to the charge, and had plainly demanded his money.

"Why!" exclaimed Wallaby-Jones, with raised eyebrows, "you don't mean to say you want your salary *weekly*? You're not here on *wages*, like the porter and the office-boy. Of course, if you wish to rank along with them, I have no objection." Here the great Wallaby-Jones put his hand ostentatiously into his pocket, as if to pull out the money on the spot.

Fred's courage failed him. Instead of calmly

taking his money like a man, he explained hurriedly that it was all right; he had only wanted to know the rule of the office; he would *prefer* to have his salary monthly.

The end of the month had come, and yet the money was not forthcoming. There could be no doubt that there was some excuse for Wallaby-Jones. He was literally over the ears in work, and Fred was kept very busy indeed helping him.

Nearly a week after the wages were due for the month—Fred had asked for his money point-blank two or three times, but had been put off—a letter came to Fred in the morning at the office, asking him to keep things going as well as he could for the next day or two, as Mr. Wallaby-Jones had been called to the country on most important business.

Then began for Fred three of the most miserable days he had ever put in. Callers came by the score, each more eager than another for an immediate interview with Wallaby-Jones. By-and-by it became plain that there was something wrong. Demands were made for the whereabouts of Fred's master. As no one could give any satisfactory answer to these demands, the callers got desperate, and the police were appealed to.

It was a clear case of swindling. All manner of bogus companies had been worked from that office. All Fred's overtime had been given to carrying out those swindles; and now, by the irony of fate, he was left to face the victims, and was himself accused as being an accomplice of the man who had robbed him of a month's wages. He had no difficulty in convincing the police of his absolute innocence of any connection with the frauds. They were not nearly so astonished at what had happened as Fred was. He had heard of honour among thieves, and never expected that a swindler would cheat even his honest assistants. He now understood that his main fitness for Wallaby-Jones's post was his ignorance of the world.

Gurleigh was now left with only four pounds and a few shillings to face London with. He began well enough. He changed his lodgings at once, and thus saved a good deal. He set about looking for a place at once, too; but here he made a serious mistake. He thought that it was a mere matter of a week or two, and that all would be well again. Accordingly, he did not write to Uncle Josiah. It would be time enough, he reflected, when he had a new and perhaps a better situation.

At first he made the mistake of applying for only good posts—posts for which, under the most favourable circumstances, he would have had no chance at his age. This wasted a great deal of time. Then he began to apply for anything that turned up, without attending to what money was offered. But it was now too late. His testimonials were old. The question naturally arose in the mind of the man who wanted a clerk, "What has this fellow been doing for the past three months?" In the few cases in which employers took the trouble to ask Fred this question, the reply that he had been assisting Wallaby-Jones at once settled the matter.

"Oh, *that* Wallaby-Jones!" generally concluded the interview.

Fred was now living as sparingly as Uncle Josiah himself could have wished; but even with the utmost economy money will melt. He was forced to part with everything that he could do without. The ring went first, as was proper; then followed in regular order everything that made life worth living. There was a limit to this source of supply, and by-and-by Fred found himself forced to appeal to his uncle for help.

Now, next to money in the purse, the best thing

an unemployed young man in London can have is an uncle in the provinces ; but it is preferable that he should not be called Josiah, or, at any rate, that he should be built on somewhat different lines from Fred's uncle. Instead of a remittance there came a long letter full of worldly wisdom and good advice about things Fred ought to have done. There was even a reference to the shameless extravagance of that three-and-sixpenny supper. It was true, as Uncle Josiah pointed out, that if Fred had now in his pocket the three-and-sixpences then scandalously wasted, he would not now be in want of bread. But somehow this truth did not seem to help much.

To do Uncle Josiah justice, he did not at first realize how destitute his nephew was. He had not given him credit for holding out so long before appealing for aid. By-and-by a remittance was sent ; and thereafter, for about two years, Uncle Josiah had sent regular advice and plain speaking, and irregular remittances. At last the uncle made up his mind that this was a hopeless case. Fred was apparently making no serious efforts to better himself. Money sent to him was only encouraging him in idleness. As a result, he sent a final post-office order, with the plain statement that it was the last of his money

that Fred would ever see. Fred knew that Josiah never went back on a word of this sort, so he was not surprised to find that all further letters to his uncle remained unanswered.

It is not to be supposed that all this time Fred had done absolutely nothing. He got occasional jobs where temporary help was required, and sometimes he got a promise of permanent work ; but "inquiries" always ended fatally for him, and he had to begin his hunt for work afresh. Once or twice, too, he had begun well, only to find that his new employer was of the Wallaby-Jones variety.

He had moved about from cheap lodging-house to cheaper lodging-house, till at last he had reached the lowest kind of night-by-night lodging that is represented by the unqualified word on the signboard, "BEDS." Of late he had frequently been unable even to pay for this humblest lodging. His last regular job had been the writing of circulars. This consisted in sitting in a draughty corridor with a city directory and a pile of sealed circulars. His work was to hunt out from the directory certain kinds of people, and address a circular to each. This was paid at the rate of half a crown per thousand circulars.

As Fred thought of all these things, and many

others with which we need not harrow you, he had a feeling of mingled shame and satisfaction—shame that such things had ever occurred at all, and satisfaction that they were now over for ever. It was rather remarkable that, even after these three terrible years, he was quite convinced that what he called his ill-luck was now at an end. It was this incurable hopefulness that had kept him from breaking down long ago, and now convinced him that he would without fail be accepted to-morrow as food for powder, which, after all, is much better than food for Thames.

As he wandered about, more or less listlessly, round all the better-lit streets, watching the strange air of unrest that marked everybody, and wondering where he would be at that time next night, he hardly felt his hunger. But as the lights disappeared one by one, he began to feel sleepy. He had intended to walk all night; but as the streets became deserted, he felt tempted to hunt out some quiet place where he might be allowed to rest in peace for a few hours.

While he was still among the more respectable streets, but just on the border of the less respectable, his attention was attracted by something that aston-

ished even him, accustomed as he was to the queer things that happen in London streets between the hours of midnight and four o'clock in the morning. It was a street fight, but naturally that was not what astonished Fred. It was not the fight, but the kind of fight, and the kind of fighters.

Picture to yourself a street row carried on between two white-haired, silk-hatted gentlemen, and you will have some idea of what astonished Fred. When you add that the fight was carried on in perfect silence, your astonishment, like Fred's, will increase.

He rubbed his eyes vigorously, but the old gentlemen were not to be rubbed out. One of them had a military-looking moustache, but was otherwise closely shaven; the other had a long white beard. The trouble seemed to be about a small black bag. Each had a firm grip of the bag with the right hand, while the left was free for offensive operations. They were evidently not fighting for victory, but for the bag; and as Fred watched them from a doorway, he could see that they were not doing much damage with their free hands. At the same time, if he was to judge by the expression of their faces, it was not from want of will that they did not hurt each other more. In the many street fights he had seen, Fred could not

remember to have observed more virulent hatred expressed on the faces of the combatants.

You may wonder why Fred did not interfere; but if you do, you clearly do not understand the etiquette of street fights. Fred was quite at home in the ordinary fight, but this was out of his beat.

The fight might have gone on long enough, if they had confined themselves to fist-work. But, whether by accident or design, White Beard contrived to trip up White Moustache, who came down upon the pavement with a thud that suggested doctors' fees. White Beard then gave such a vicious twist to the bag that the vanquished man had to let go.

As the conqueror hobbled away at what he probably took for a run, Fred stepped out from the doorway in which he had stood, and proceeded to raise the fallen man. His kindly offices were not welcomed. White Moustache pushed him off.

"Don't mind me!" he screamed; "I'm all right. Pursue the thief, and recover my valise. A hundred pounds if you recover my valise! Don't mind me, I tell you. A hundred pounds! A thousand thunders! A hundred pounds, did I say? A hundred and fifty if you save my valise. Run, man, run! My valise! my valise!"

Thus urged, Fred gave up his idea of first aid to the wounded, and dashed after the thief. The chase in itself was child's play, but it was easier to come up with the feeble runner than to take from him the stolen bag. The old man gave all his attention to retaining it, and it took all Fred's strength and cunning to wrest it away. First he gave the thief a nasty twist that brought him down on one knee; then with a sudden blow with the side of the hand at the elbow of the arm that retained a grip of the bag, he succeeded in causing his adversary to let go. Knocking the thief over on the pavement, Fred returned at full speed to the place where he had left the plundered man, who was now on his feet, and coming to meet the rescuer of his bag.

"My valise!" screamed the old gentleman, holding out his hand for his recovered property.

"My hundred and fifty pounds," replied Fred quietly.

"I—I—I haven't the money in my pocket, and I am in a desperate hurry; the thief may return, and I— Kindly give me the bag, and—"

"Oh, I daresay," replied Fred coolly. He had now some prospect of both food and shelter, and was not at all inclined to lose the chance of either.

The old gentleman tore off his watch and chain, and handed them over with a handful of loose money that he had pulled out of his trousers pocket.

"For Heaven's sake give me my bag! It's a matter of life and death. I'll give you the money to-morrow. My address is—that is, I'll meet you anywhere—at—say—here's a ring, too—Charing Cross Station—bookstall—at noon, and—"

By this time he was moving off as quickly as he could. For, in order to accept the ring, Fred had to let go the bag, since his other hand was occupied with the watch and the loose money.

As he was putting the watch and the money into his pocket—somehow he had far more satisfaction in the money than in the much more valuable watch and ring—with a good deal of pleasure, he was disgusted to find the thief at his elbow.

"He offers you a hundred and fifty: I offer you two hundred if you catch him and bring me back my bag."

"Your bag! Why, didn't I see you steal it?"

"My bag, I tell you!" snapped the old gentleman. "You'll never see him or your hundred and fifty again, while I'll take you with me now to my house and give you your money. For God's sake after him

before it's too late! At least bring him back, and let us talk face to face."

Fred was confused, but he determined to see this thing to an end. His plan now was to capture the vanishing old man, drag him back, and have the affair thrashed out before himself as a sort of judge. In a few minutes he had his man by the throat, and was dragging him back to the corner where the row had begun. The old gentleman whom he had supposed to be waiting for him at the corner had followed as quickly as he could, and was in fact now close upon the two, and whispered in Fred's ear,—

"Give me the bag before it's too late, and let the fool go, and look out for yourself. Let's take different ways. He'll follow you, thinking you're the thief. To-morrow afternoon in—eh—the mummy room, British Museum."

Fred did not at all understand what this meant. Still, he had no intention of thus giving up his hold of the bag; but at the sound of the whispering the captive old man seemed to become mad, and wriggled with a vigour that called forth all Fred's strength and attention. The bag had to attend to itself while Fred secured his grip of the writhing prisoner. At

this point two very different voices sounded in Fred's ears, one in each ear.

The quiet voice said,—

"My promise still holds good: a hundred and fifty pounds at Charing Cross, if you say nothing to the authorities."

The loud voice said with much emphasis,—

"No you don't; not this journey."

It was a moment or two before Fred realized what had happened. Then things became painfully clear. He was in the hands of an aggressively powerful policeman, who was manifestly rejoicing at having caught a robber in the very act. The policeman's delight was very soon damped, however. It had not taken the old gentleman, whose throat Fred had been forced to relinquish, such a long time to realize the situation as had been the case with Fred. And as this old gentleman seemed to have no desire for a closer acquaintance with the police, he was quietly but rapidly moving off.

"Hi, there, you! Stop, I say. Stay where you are. I want your name and address."

As the old gentleman continued what was evidently nothing but a flight, the policeman turned his attention to the other old man upon whom he relied

as a witness. To his astonishment this second old gentleman was farther off now than the first.

"Hi, you too!" he yelled in rage; "I want you as a witness. Stop, I tell you."

As neither of the retreating figures paid any attention to his calls, he suddenly tightened his grip on Fred, and proceeded to drag him after the nearer of the two old gentlemen. But while Fred was helpless to escape from the hands of his powerful captor, he had quite enough energy to make it impossible for that captor to continue a running chase. A moment or two convinced the constable that he could not do two things at once. He halted, and after a preliminary extra twist at Fred's coat-collar to make sure of preventing any chance of escape, he used his whistle to call his mate. While the two waited till an answering signal told them that the other constable was coming, Fred had time to collect his thoughts. He resolved that he would brazen it out with this policeman.

"Now that you have had time to reflect on your conduct, perhaps you will explain what you mean by this unwarrantable assault."

The constable nearly exploded with suppressed rage at this unheard-of impudence.

"Didn't I catch you red-'anded a-garrotin' a ole gen'leman?" he spluttered.

"A charge of this kind generally demands proof, I believe," went on Fred, becoming cooler as his captor waxed more indignant.

"Proof! My heyes! didn' I see?"

"And suppose your eyes deceived you? You've only two, you know."

"An' wot's *your* story? You was a-cuddlin' the ole gent, I s'pose. Quite lovin' like, warn't it?"

By this time the other constable had joined them. He took a much calmer view of the case, as was natural, since it was not his catch. When he learned what had passed between Fred and his captor, he whispered something in the ear of the first constable, who thereupon, in some confusion, turned to Fred and warned him that anything he said might be used against him.

"You're a little late in mentioning that, aren't you?" asked Fred blandly. But to this no answer was made.

"You'll find, my youngster, that assault is no laughing matter, whether there has been robbery or not."

The other constable suggested a search for stolen

objects, in case Fred should contrive to drop some of the stolen articles between that and Wardick Square. A dip into Fred's trousers pocket resulted in the production of the watch and chain.

"The nooest fashun, I b'lieve, 's to wear your watch in your trousers pocket—eh?"

The captor had recovered his good humour at this discovery of damning evidence against his prisoner.

"The old gentleman gave me the watch and chain," retorted Fred, with as much conviction as he could throw into his words.

"O' course. An' you was jus' a-huggin' 'im by the throat by way o' sayin' thanky. Oh yes!"

The ring was next fished out.

"Another present from a grateful ole man?" sneered the constable.

"Yes," replied Fred steadily; "he gave me the ring, and promised me money to-morrow besides."

"If ye'd only let go his windpipe?" interpolated the second policeman. "But there's no good in talking here. We'll see what the inspector says."

It has been hinted that Fred had no prospect of a bed that night; but as he marched off between the two big policemen, he felt that for one night at least he was sure of a shelter.

CHAPTER II.

DAWN OF PROSPERITY.

ARRIVED at the Wardick Square Police Station, Fred was marched into the charge-room, where the officer sleepily turned over the charge-book.

“Your name?”

“Frederick Gurleigh.”

“Your address?”

Fred was in a state of utter collapse. The shame of the thing had never before struck him as it did now. He had frequently been homeless before, but he had always been able to keep his humiliation to himself. He had never before been called upon to make a public proclamation that his home was the streets. He had not even the presence of mind to give the latest address to which he had had a title. The policeman who had captured him was evidently greatly pleased at the turn affairs were taking.

However, the officer at the book seemed to lay no stress on the lack of information on this point. He merely remarked in a matter-of-fact tone, as he wrote,—

“No address.”

“Occupation?”

Another collapse. As we know, he had no regular occupation. He was of the great army who are prepared to do that somewhat vague work, “anything.” The last thing he had been doing was the addressing of circulars for an advertising agency.

“Better say something,” suggested the officer; “it looks tidier.”

“Advertising agent.”

“Not bad,” remarked the officer. “Your age last birthday?”

“Twenty-two.”

Thereafter the conversation got into the hands of the constables, who made matters look particularly black for Fred. A more thorough search than the two men could have made in the streets resulted in the production of the loose money and a pocket-book that had seen better days. The money amounted to between four and five pounds, and was altogether out of keeping with the appearance of Fred and with his

lack of an address. Before putting any questions, however, the police examined the contents of the pocket-book. These were mainly little bits of white and coloured paper. The searchers were tolerably familiar with this kind of paper; most of their customers carried some of it about with them. But there was a touch of suspicion in the question which the officer now put.

"You gave your name as Frederick Gurleigh. Then who is this Josiah Larches who has pawned those things? An *alias*, I suppose?"

"Josiah Larches is my uncle."

Fred understood, but paid no attention to, the smile that flitted across the faces of all present. He had now a new fear. If this thing appeared in the papers, his own name would be known, and would be sure to make its way to the paper in the office of which he had once served. This would be terrible; but if, in addition, it appeared in black and white that he had actually pawned all his effects under the name of his ultra-respectable uncle, he would be held up to the scorn of all right-thinking men and women. He proceeded to explain his reasons for using his uncle's name. He wanted that uncle to have the right to all the pawn-tickets. It was the

only way he could think of to repay the outlays that the uncle had incurred on his account. This all seemed very amusing to the police people. But what had at first appeared a very suspicious circumstance turned out to be a point in Fred's favour.

"These tickets are all of old date. Why have you no newer ones?"

"Because I have had nothing to pawn for longer than I can remember."

This seemed to produce a favourable effect, which was not marred by the discovery in the pocket-book of an exact note of all the money, with dates, which Uncle Josiah had sent him. After being again warned that he need not speak unless he liked, and that if he did speak, what he said might be used against him, he was invited to tell all he knew of the strange events of the night. Thereupon he gave a full statement of all that had happened, reserving only one little point for his own use. This was the appointment in the mummy room at the British Museum. He saw quite clearly that there was very little to be hoped for from the man who had promised the hundred and fifty pounds. The man had not got the bag, and here was Fred telling all he knew about him; therefore no money could be expected for keep-

ing a secret which was already divulged, so far as Fred knew it. His idea was to use the watch-and-chain old gentleman for all he was worth as a means of escape from the hands of the police, and then to work the mummy-room man as a means of getting some advantage for himself.

When Fred had finished his statement, the officer in charge was somewhat at a loss what to do. From one point of view Fred was not a very reputable character, and yet there was nothing whatever against him. The watch-and-ring incident was very suspicious, yet the conduct of both old gentlemen, as reported by the police, was, to say the least, queer, and tended distinctly in Fred's favour. Turning to Fred, the officer asked,—

“Have you any great objection to sleeping under our care for to-night—not as a prisoner, you understand, but to make sure?”

Fred had no objections in the world; but he took the opportunity of this comparative yielding of the authorities to plead very strongly for the chance of proving his case by trying to meet the old gentleman at Charing Cross Station. The officer would promise him nothing, but Fred gathered that there would be no great difficulty in making the experiment of

giving the old gentleman the chance to redeem his promise.

Next morning Fred was informed that the authorities had decided to let him make the attempt of meeting the owner of the watch and ring. These had been carefully examined. Their joint value was stated to be not less than fifty pounds. The watch was of French make, and could possibly be traced through its maker. The ring had the initials "B.F." inside it. The characters were foreign, probably of French origin.

Fred and a couple of men in plain clothes were driven as far as the entrance to the National Gallery. From there they walked to Charing Cross, Fred walking as if he were alone; but the two plain-clothes men were not far off. Arrived at the station, he took up a position not far from the principal bookstall, and kept an ostentatious lookout. This he did on the advice of his escort, who had pointed out that, since he had admitted that he would not be able to recognize the old gentleman, it was more than likely that the old gentleman would not be able to recognize him, while it would be easy to select a man who was obviously looking out for somebody.

Fred was at his post a few minutes before noon,

and a few minutes after the clock had indicated noon he was a little startled to find himself addressed by a policeman, who asked him,—

“Are you the young man that expects to meet somebody here?”

“Yes,” stammered Fred; “but you’re not—”

“What sort o’ gentleman did you expect?” continued the policeman.

“An old white-haired gentleman.”

“Was there anything about a pocket-book in it?” went on the policeman stolidly.

“No; but there was a ring and there was a watch in it.”

“Right y’are. Here’s your letter,” replied the policeman, and made for the door with a countenance beaming with self-satisfaction. No doubt he was charmed with the ingenuity he had shown in the discharge of his mission. But his satisfaction was short-lived. When he reached the entrance he found that he had run himself between two men who showed no intention of separating to allow him to pass. Instead, they said some words to him that completely changed the expression on his face. In point of fact, they had reminded him that what he had done was a breach of by-law some number or

other, and that the only way in which he could atone for his sin was by leading to the capture of the person who had intrusted him with this letter.

But if the plain-clothes men grinned at the sudden change in the constable's expression, he might have reciprocated had he seen the change in theirs a moment after he had gone out; for, as soon as he had left, they resumed their scrutiny of Fred—or, rather, they meant to, for he was no longer there to be scrutinized. The temptation had been too great. For a moment he had hesitated, when he saw his escort taken up with the unexpected policeman. But the desire for liberty was so strong that he had yielded, and had coolly walked out by another of the gates.

It was a foolish thing to do, for he felt that the coming of any message at all from the owner of the watch was enough to clear him of all charge of robbery. Still, he was very eager to meet the man in the mummy room. What he hoped for was not so much a mere sum of money, as the chance of getting a respectable position once again. Strange as it may seem, his main desire was to justify himself in the opinion of that Uncle Josiah whose generosity most people would have maintained that he had abused.

A moment or two was enough to convince the plain-clothes men that Fred was entirely lost. They then turned their attention vigorously to the constable, to see if he would succeed in directing them to the sender of the letter. They followed him at a respectable distance for a while, but at last he turned towards them, confessing that he could find no trace of the young fellow who had given him the letter.

"Young fellow!" exclaimed one of the plain-clothes men; "I thought he was an old white-haired man."

"There was an old man mixed up in it," replied the crestfallen constable, "but the fellow who gave me the letter and the half-sovereign was quite young."

"Can you describe him?"

The constable eagerly entered into details, the sum of which was that the man was little, dark, foreign-looking. With this unsatisfactory result of their morning's work, the two plain-clothes men had to return to Wardick Square, bringing, like Johnny Cope, the news of their own defeat.

If they were sad and disappointed, their late prisoner was hardly more cheerful. In spite of all his former trials, he had always been able to look the world in the face; but now he had fallen

into that lowest level, "wanted" by the police. To be sure, they had no case against him, and his own conscience was entirely clear; but somehow the world is different when it is necessary to turn into a side street as soon as a policeman's helmet appears in sight.

The letter which had been the cause of much of this trouble was only mysterious, and gave very little satisfaction. It ran:—

"If you find out who I am from the other, and have the sense to keep your own counsel, you will find it worth your while. I am much wealthier than he, and *whatever* he offers you to appear as witness against me, I will pay you *double* to remain silent. I need not betray my name here; for unless you know me, I need not trouble about you; while if you know me, you will know where to apply."

Manifestly there was nothing to be done till the interview in the mummy room. This letter was in itself of no importance, and for the first time Fred had a gleam of comfort in having escaped the police. It was terrible, this feeling of being wanted; but it would have been still more terrible to have missed the chance that this meeting seemed to offer. If he had remained with the police, it was quite likely that

they would have invited him to remain under their protection for yet another night; and even if they had let him go, he would have had no assurance that he was not watched. Then Fred tried, with a little success, to cheer himself up. The police knew almost nothing about him. He was known only to one police station. He had not been photographed. The description that could be sent round the police stations would require to be of the most general character—something that would fit several thousands of unfortunate young men in London. Besides, had they any right to describe him at all? Was he really wanted? Was there not some formality to be gone through in the way of getting a warrant? That could not be done till the afternoon at any rate, so he was free to keep his appointment, even in the teeth of the police.

In this way he had swaggered himself into quite a bold frame of mind by the time he reached the entrance gate of the British Museum. There, however, all his boldness deserted him, for at the narrower gateway stood a policeman, as if waiting for him. The man had actually a grin on his face, and it took Fred all his time to keep his legs from running away with his body. As soon as he had collected

his scattered thoughts, he remembered that there was always a policeman at that gate, and the grin he easily resolved into an effect of his own imagination.

At all events he had to pass the man if he meant to keep his appointment; and when it came to the point, he walked past in very good style on the side at which the policeman stood, although it was quite open for him to take the other side, and keep at a distance from the policeman.

Once within the mummy room, Fred sat on one of the cushioned seats without a back, and waited. He was hungry again, but not very hungry, for that morning he had had breakfast, and it was now only half-past three. But it was well that the seat had no back, since he would inevitably have gone to sleep; for he had acquired the power of going to sleep wherever he could lean against something.

He had before him one of the mummies placed on end, and had begun to weave a romance round it, as is the manner of idle people in that room, when a soft voice at his ear made him start up. The voice began, "Are you sure you are not watched?" but ended, "Sit down, can't you, and do not attract attention."

On this reproof Fred resumed his easy position,

and in answer to his questioner gave as full an account as he could of the events that had followed his arrest. The old gentleman appeared to be pleased with what had taken place, but by several unexpected and apparently irrelevant questions satisfied himself that Fred was telling a true tale. What he appeared to lay most stress upon was that Fred had had no previous connection of any kind with the other old man.

“Would you know him again?”

“Easily. I had a capital view of him that time that I had him by the throat and was trying to drag him to you.”

“And if anything were to go wrong with me, you would be prepared to give evidence of what you saw last night?”

“Yes,” said Fred a little doubtfully. “But you’d better read that.”

“M,” murmured the other. “By showing me this you mean that you are prepared to act *for* me. It can’t be to raise my terms, for he outbids whatever I may offer.”

“I want a respectable situation,” replied Fred, not very relevantly.

“As to respectability I am none too sure,” replied

the old man ; “ but I want the help of a young and strong fellow like you, if only to protect me against another attack.”

At the end of the talk the old man appeared to be quite convinced of the sincerity of the young one, and told him that he would be glad to see him at his house, number so-and-so Russell Square. His name, it appeared, was Welligham.

Fred more than appreciated what Mr. Welligham said of the inadvisability of a young man, dressed as Fred then was, coming to take up his abode in Russell Square. A ten-pound note changed hands in that mummy room, and Fred departed towards Holborn.

There are people who have grave objections to ready-made clothes, but Fred was not among them. In future days, no doubt, he changed his mind, but at this time he was more than pleased at the chance of exchanging that telltale frock-coat of his for something shorter and better ; for, by a strange combination of circumstances, the deeper the poverty into which a man falls in London, the longer does his coat become. Probably the nature of cast-off clothing has something to do with this.

In any case, Fred went to one of those shops that

supply you with everything, from silk hats to shoe laces, and, after a considerable amount of careful choosing, had a couple of parcels made up for him, the contents of which represented eight of the ten pounds he had received from Welligham. At first he had intended to put on his new grandeur in the fitting-on room of the general provider, but a more excellent plan suggested itself to him.

With a bundle under each arm, and a gleam of triumph in his eye, he made for one of the streets joining Holborn with the Strand and the river. He knew exactly where he was going, and when he reached the place, he did not need to look up at the signboard to know that this was where one could have baths.

The bath man was a little suspicious of the bundles.

"You're not tryin' on any o' them chemical fakes?" he asked doubtfully; for he had sometimes to regret the incautious introduction of chemicals into his zinc baths. Fred easily reassured him, by a sight of the contents of one of the parcels.

When the delightful part of the bath was over, and Fred had donned his new grandeur, he found himself face to face with two difficulties. What

was he to do with his old garments, and what was he to do without a new hat? The first difficulty was met by paying three coppers to the bath man to throw out the old rags. The second problem was more serious.

He had felt that the sight of a man dressed as he had been, and burdened with two bulky parcels, yet ending in a brand-new silk hat, would be too funny to be comfortable. So he had arranged that his new hat and umbrella should wait in the shop in Holborn till the rest of his appearance would not make these new possessions ridiculous. But he had forgotten the other side of the question, and now it was his clothes that were ashamed of the hat. Fred will never forget the feeling of intolerable shame that oppressed him all the way from his bath back to the shop. Almost everybody gazed at him, and there were enough youngsters with sufficient leisure to make him exceedingly uncomfortable by their frank criticism of his new "togs" and his concertina hat.

What made his case all the worse was that the ready-mades had turned out a remarkably good fit. It is your well-made man who can best meet the disadvantages of unmeasured garments; and, in spite

of his unofficial astragalus, Fred was well made. At last it was over: the shop was reached, and Fred came out from it a new man.

Though we have forgotten to mention it, Fred had not gone to the provider's straight away. He had made a call at one of those shameless shops that call themselves bluntly "eating-houses." There he had spent four-fifths of the half-crown that Welligham had added, on Fred's suggestion, to the ten-pound note, to keep body and soul together till the note had been changed. Eating-house people do not understand notes of this magnitude.

As Fred moved towards Russell Square in a leisurely way, he felt that he did not care if he never saw food again in his life. He had done enough eating that day to last him for all time.

It was seven o'clock before he made his appearance at Welligham's, but no one could say that the time had been misspent. The servant had never ushered into Mr. Welligham's study a more creditable figure than Fred made that evening.

CHAPTER III.

THE GREEDY MACHINE.

WHEN Fred and his new master were seated opposite each other by the fire in the little study, Welligham evidently felt that it would be better that his assistant should know something about what had happened on the preceding night.

“You will be surprised to learn that my assailant of last night was none other than Professor Frisaine.”

Fred *was* surprised, though not quite in the way Welligham had expected. As a matter of fact he had never heard of Professor Frisaine. At first Welligham was a little annoyed at Fred’s blank ignorance of a man of world-wide fame, but he soon consoled himself by the thought that this was the very sort of man he wanted to assist him—a man who knew nothing about science, and therefore could not betray any secrets. He proceeded to give Fred a general idea of how things stood.

"This Frisaine—Blaise Frisaine—has got some inkling of a great discovery that I have made, and is anxious to anticipate me in proclaiming and utilizing it. Two years ago I was vain enough to adumbrate my discovery before the Royal Society. He was the only man among the crowd—I must say that to his credit—who had the least understanding of the importance of the discovery. The others neither saw its importance, nor, indeed, believed in its existence. Anything dealing with the will of man is always relegated to psychology, and you know what that means to a man of science."

Fred had no earthly idea what that might mean to a man of science, or to a man of any other kind. Welligham saw that his new assistant, while an intelligent fellow, had no scientific training, and, what was more, had no scientific interests.

All that Fred wanted to know was what practical application was to be made of this discovery, but he showed no desire to pry into the elaborate calculations with which Welligham—now that he had begun to trust him—was prepared to overwhelm him. Somewhat disappointed at this lack of scientific curiosity, Welligham came suddenly to the practical application, which he expressed in the most unscientific way.

"The practical result of my discovery is that I can do with men anything I want. Give me but enough money and the earth is at my feet."

Fred thought that, even without this marvellous discovery, he could make something of the world himself, if somebody would but give him "enough money." But, naturally, he did not say this. He knew when he was well off, and did not propose to return to his old address so long as a little silent attention would ensure his residence at Russell Square. He continued listening, and soon began to feel that there must be more in this discovery than he had at first thought. Whether it produced scientific results or not, it was evidently accompanied by very dangerous experiments—not dangerous to the experimenters, but to those experimented upon; for, in the course of his talking, Welligham had made it plain that he had to experiment not only upon animals, but also upon human beings.

Instinctively Fred edged away from this genial old gentleman. He felt a perfect cataract of cold water running down his back; his skin began prickling all over him. What is a new suit of clothes of the best ready-made quality, what is a dinner of such stupendous magnitude as to make the very thought

of food unpleasant, what is even the prospect of paying back Uncle Josiah's begrudged money, if these things are to be purchased by submitting to the knife of a cold-blooded scientist?

Too late Fred remembered that Welligham had locked the door of the study on entering, on what now appeared the frivolous pretext of preventing disturbance. Fred had been dodging police helmets all day; now he would have given anything he had in the world for the sight of one of these friendly helmets.

"Suppose we go to the laboratory," suggested Welligham genially; "we shall be better able there to—"

All at once Fred's courage returned. The perspiration did not dry upon his forehead, it is true, but the knowledge returned to him that he was infinitely stronger than this fiendish old man, and could break him over his knees if he liked. He stood, and bending over the old man, threateningly growled,—

"No laboratory for me; not any to-day, thank you. If you dare to lay a finger on me in the way of experimenting, I'll break every bone in your miserable body."

"My good fellow," exclaimed Welligham, without

making the slightest motion to rise, "you are entirely on the wrong tack. I can understand your feelings, but I ask you to believe me when I say that I have no need whatever for your services as a subject. I have now almost passed the stage of experimenting; my results are practically perfect. All that I require now is money to provide materials for work on a grand scale. In fact, my difficulty now lies in the simplicity of my results. I dare not leave my notes about anywhere. If they fell into the hands of an intelligent man, he might be able to piece them together and arrive at my grand conclusion."

Fred sat down once more. His liking for his new master was no greater than it had been a moment before, but his fear had gone. After a short pause Welligham went on.

"No, I need not fear a merely intelligent man. The law of gravitation stared intelligent men in the face for thousands of years before Newton discovered it. No, the only man I am really afraid of is this same Blaise Frisaine. He has some of the links; he knows what is lacking; he is hunting for the missing links; and he has plenty of money—a nation at his back, in fact."

Turning suddenly to Fred, Welligham went on

eagerly: "You were afraid a moment ago—well, well, not afraid; I withdraw the word if it annoys you; we'll say startled—because you thought my purpose was to use you as a subject. I wonder how you will take my real use for you."

Here the same sensations, in a somewhat modified form, made Fred feel that clothing, food, and warmth had their uncomfortable accompaniment. Welligham certainly gave his assistant ample time to conjure up horrible things before going on in the same eager tone.

"I want you to protect me against this Blaise Frisaine. I cannot sleep at night for him. Not that I am afraid of the man as a man. It is for my discovery that I fear. Twice he has penetrated to my laboratory, and twice he has gained a step towards the solution. I dare not leave my notes anywhere out of my sight. What I have done is to reduce them to their most compact form; to cipher them in different ways; and, as a final precaution, to keep a certain portion of each calculation in my memory. All the turning points are thus stored in my memory alone. The strain is terrible, and I am breaking down under it. I want you to help to keep watch with me—watch about."

"Oh, as to that," replied Fred, with a sigh of relief, "I'm with you all the time. But why don't you call in the police?"

Welligham smiled sarcastically.

"The police! Oh yes, I called in the police. I placed my house in their hands for protection, as soon as I found that Frisaine was determined to have my secret. I have the best reason to believe that it was through the *police* that he obtained his first entry into my laboratory."

"But why didn't you call for the police last night when the fellow attacked you?" asked Fred, with some suspicion, as he recalled the peculiar affray.

Welligham hesitated a moment before answering.

"You are evidently shocked at the idea of experimenting on human beings, and the police undoubtedly share your objections. I had been experimenting in one of the low districts—it does not matter where. The bag contained the results of my work. Frisaine knew this, and knew that these results were very near the final point. Hence his eagerness. The police, on the other hand, would have found evidence of illegal experimenting. I have no wish to go to prison to please a stupid administration."

Fred could not repress a shudder. His curiosity

was roused in spite of himself. He loathed this cold-blooded man, to whom he yet felt himself indebted. Accordingly he wanted to make the best case for him.

"You give them chloroform, I hope?"

"Eh, what? Chloroform the police? Why should I do that?"

"No, I don't mean the police; I mean your victims."

"Oh, my subjects. No, I don't chloroform them. You see, I only act upon their wills; and if they were unconscious, my experiments would be impossible."

"Don't they yell horribly?" asked Fred, unable to suppress his desire to know the worst.

"No; why should they?" replied Welligham with some surprise. "I don't want them to yell."

"I daresay not," replied Fred dryly. "But it is not every man that will hold his tongue while you are hacking him up, merely because you want him to keep quiet."

"Ah, you are again under a misapprehension. My experiments do not imply any hacking up; they are perfectly painless. Sometimes they result in death, it is true; but even then there is no pain. Besides, the subject is warned beforehand of what may happen, and his death means an additional payment to his

relatives. Nearly all my subjects have come to me for the good of their relatives. I'm a public benefactor."

This line of humour was abhorrent to Fred, who yet went on probing.

"Is it a well-paid business, then, being your subject?"

"That depends on your ideas. All I know is that three years ago I was a very wealthy man, and now I am down to my last five thousand."

"All spent on subjects?"

"Except what has gone in chemicals. But talking of money reminds me that we have that little affair of yours to settle yet—the two hundred pounds."

"Oh, as to that," replied Fred very uneasily, "I don't know that I want it. You see, I did nothing—at any rate, nothing worth that amount. But I should like a permanent position, at what you think I'm worth."

"Well, I think you worth two hundred to begin with; and when we get to know each other better, I have no doubt you will find—"

Welligham evidently thought better of what he was about to say, and confined himself to going to the safe in the corner and bringing out gold and

notes to the amount of one hundred and ninety pounds, for which he required a receipt.

When Fred represented to him his feeling that it was unfair to take so much money from a man who was confessedly so sorely in need of it himself, Welligham pointed out that a few hundreds were nothing to him. Unless he could secure fifty thousand pounds, no smaller sum was of any consequence. He added, however, that he had hopes of raising the money through a business friend of his, if he could only convince this friend that there was money to be made out of the results of the discovery. He admitted that the friend was very sceptical, but did not altogether refuse his co-operation. The conversation then returned to Frisaine, who was never very far from Welligham's thoughts.

"How would it do," suggested Fred idly, "to kidnap the fellow, and lay him by the heels in some cellar till it suits you to proclaim your discovery?"

To his surprise, Welligham answered quite seriously that he had thought of this plan, but that it was unworkable, since Frisaine had all France at his back.

"Why, what has France got to do with it?" asked Fred, more and more puzzled.

"My discovery, if made known to France, would place the world at her feet, and the French government have the sense to know it."

"But would it not place the world at our feet, if our government knew it?"

"Our government is an ass," was all that Welligham deigned to say on this point; from which Fred wisely concluded that our government had had an offer of this wonderful discovery, and had not accepted it.

"Have you thought of floating a company?" asked Fred, with memories of Wallaby-Jones.

Welligham indulgently explained that the great discovery did not commend itself to mercantile men in general. He evidently wanted to change the subject; so, when he proposed that they should now go to the laboratory, Fred offered no objection.

This laboratory was a long room, with benches along either side, and all manner of queer-looking machines and apparatus. At the end farthest from the door was a rather large and complicated machine, which seemed to be made up mainly of brass spikes. This naturally attracted Fred's notice, but Welligham passed it over with small attention, and turned lovingly to a little machine that could be put into an ordinary hat-box.

"There," said the old man proudly—"there you have a machine that will revolutionize social life."

"But I thought you wanted fifty thousand pounds to make your machine, and there it is all ready."

"The machine is all right," was the reply. "It is the feeding of the machine that costs the money."

"What does it feed on?" asked Fred curiously.

"On a stuff that nobody knows anything about but myself, and maybe Frisaine—I'm not sure about him—a stuff that I call *panergon*. Panergon does not exist native anywhere, so far as I know. I have to manufacture it for myself out of certain of the rarest and most costly chemical elements. I have a small stock of it in hand, but not enough, nor nearly enough, to make my machine do its work to any effect."

"What is the machine good for?" asked Fred.

But to this question Welligham made no reply. Either he was unwilling to expose his plans further, at that stage, or he thought that Fred could not follow the necessary scientific explanations. Instead, he got Fred to help him with certain bits of mechanical work that involved the shifting about of some heavy materials. It evidently involved also the flashing about of a great many little jagged lights. These attracted Fred's attention much more than did

the mysterious machine with the costly appetite. He asked what caused them.

"Oh, these? These are the overflow energy of the ordinary second-remove electricity."

Fred knew nothing about the recent discovery that electricity could be dealt with in two modified forms—the first and second remove—as well as in its plain form. But he was curious about the dancing lights, that made a little tame aurora borealis in the laboratory. Seeing that he was interested, Welligham gratified him by the display of the lights in regular order—in crosses, circles, squares, and other patterns.

"You seem to be able to do what you like with these lights. Couldn't you make them form writing?"

"Perfectly." And in a moment Fred saw his own name written in flame on the wall, and glimmering out of the darkness with all the awe-inspiring effect of the writing at Belshazzar's feast. Fred did not think much of the ghostly effect: an idea had come to him.

"Could you make big writing as easily as little?" he asked.

"Oh yes. It is a mere matter of dynamos."

"Is the dynamo as greedy for money as your other machine?"

"Oh no. An ordinary dynamo can easily produce all the force we require for a thing like this."

"And you could make writing, with letters maybe ten feet long, on a blank wall, at no very great cost?"

"I could write on the sky, with letters any size you please, at a very reasonable cost."

"On the sky, did you say?"

"On the sky," repeated Welligham.

"So that most of the people in town could read them, for instance?"

"There's nothing to prevent it. What of that?"

He could not help noticing that Fred was excited.

"There's just this about it, that if you can guarantee the writing on the sky, I think I see my way of guaranteeing you, within a very short time, your fifty thousand pounds for your other machine. Does anybody else know how to make writing on the sky?"

"I should think that every scientific man that deserves the name could direct the second-remove current in any way he chooses; but probably no one has thought of writing on the sky."

"I hope not," replied Fred eagerly. "What I propose is that you arrange to print on the sky some plain advertisements—say soap or pills."

"I prefer not," said Welligham coldly. "Soap and pills are hardly in my way of working."

"But then your greedy machine!"

This consideration evidently had its effect.

"Besides, I shall look after all the details," added Fred soothingly. "All you will have to do is to print the letters on the sky."

From this point Fred took the lead in the conversation. He did all the questioning, and made all the arrangements. Welligham confined himself to suggesting ways of carrying out Fred's proposals. It turned out that probably most electrician engineers had not the power of the second remove that Welligham had. On being pressed, that gentleman admitted that perhaps he had unduly depreciated the importance of his command over the second remove, and that perhaps he had done this merely because of the enormous importance he attached to his other discovery. Further, on inquiry, Fred found that Welligham professed to be able to project his lights as far above the city as was necessary for everybody in the city to see them.

"For that matter," he added, "why not elevate them to a sufficient altitude for them to be visible from every point in the British Isles?"

"Why not?" gasped Fred. "Do that, and I'll guarantee you your fifty thousand next week."

Welligham seemed astonished at this prospect, and showed his satisfaction by at once sitting down at a desk and making some calculations by the help of some books that he took down for the purpose. The work took him longer than Fred had anticipated. But the younger man knew too well the importance of humouring such a calculator to think of disturbing him. Welligham wandered from book to book, and filled sheet after sheet of paper. At last he was ready.

"The cost is rather more than I had thought," he admitted. "I find that to keep the electricity in the required form for four hours, at the required height and of the necessary size, will involve an outlay of close on four hundred pounds—that is, of course, in addition to the apparatus which I already possess."

"For four hundred pounds you can give a four hours' display in the sky of somebody's pills or soap that can be read by everybody in the British Isles?"

"Yes, I think I can safely promise that," replied Welligham, glancing at his calculations.

"Then our fortune's made, and your greedy machine may look forward to a hearty meal."

Welligham made no comment on Fred's *our*. He seemed to take it for granted that Fred would share in whatever profit might arise from this new venture. As for Fred, his sole regret was that it was now too late to call on any possible advertiser. Turning over in his mind the possibilities before him, he found that it would be desirable to find out as much as possible from Welligham, in order to be able to make the best appeal to his clients.

"By the way, Mr. Welligham, is there anything to hinder our making the advertisement big enough to be read on both sides of the Atlantic?"

Fred's ideas were certainly expanding.

"Unfortunately there is. We might get over the difficulty of the size of the characters, but then we have the curvature of the earth's surface to contend against. The letters had better be in the zenith. Now it is impossible to give America the same zenith as England."

Fred saw no difficulty in the matter, but he was willing to take his master's word for it, and confined himself to a consideration of the worldly aspect of the venture.

"How long will your arrangements take? I mean, when could I promise the display?"

"A week will be quite long enough for me," replied Welligham.

There was another question that had been hovering upon Fred's lips since the subject had been started, but which he had not dared to ask. It had to be faced now, however, for it involved a vital point.

"May I ask, Mr. Welligham—it is really necessary that I should know—whether you are prepared to spend the necessary four hundred pounds in the first instance, on condition of being repaid as soon as the experiment has proved successful? I know those business people. They are quite willing to pay for value received, but they will not advance a penny on mere prospects."

Welligham looked a little uneasy. But before answering he turned towards some cupboards at the other end of the laboratory, and after a careful examination of their contents, he reported that he thought he had enough material in stock to raise the necessary force for one exhibition of four hours without buying any more.

"In that case," replied Fred, "there will be no difficulty about the second."

CHAPTER IV.

A FORTUNE FROM THE SKY.

NEXT morning Fred started work early. But his first piece of business was of a purely private character. He called at a bank, and procured a draft for fifty-three pounds fourteen and sevenpence, being the exact amount to a penny that he had received from his uncle Josiah. It was a pity that he was so busy that morning, as it prevented him from fully enjoying this long-looked-forward-to function of sending back the money. How often he had pictured the scene, and how hopeless had its realization become of late! The letter itself he had written the evening before. It required no thought, as it had been composed long, long ago. The very words of it had been running in his head for months. Yet the very wording of the letter was inaccurate now, for it referred to "the enclosed detailed

statement" of all the money he had received, and now there was no detailed statement to enclose; for, though Fred had no difficulty in remembering the exact amount that he owed, he was unable to recall all the details that were so carefully recorded in that pocket-book now in safe keeping at Wardick Square.

Before sending off the letter, Fred read it over again, to have the final satisfaction of thinking how Uncle Josiah would squirm as he read its scathing terms. To his own surprise it no longer gave him any satisfaction; in fact, he rather disliked it. After all, his uncle had done him no wrong in sending the money. A month ago Fred would have denied the possibility of his ever doing what he now did. He tore up the letter that had been so long composed in his mind, went into a stationer's shop, and wrote a very short note, telling Uncle Josiah that he had at last got a situation, that he was glad to be able to return the money, and ended by *thanking* his uncle for the loan. The letter was posted rather in a hurry, as Fred did not quite know what to make of himself. However, he had other things to keep him busy just then.

It was perhaps no great matter that he could not recover the note of his debts, but he felt that he

should like very much to have his pawn-tickets. He knew by bitter experience that appearances go a very long way in doing business, and he wanted very much to redeem his own watch, from which he had now been so long separated. Then there were that diamond ring and a silver-headed cane; but somehow Fred had not so much faith in diamond rings and silver-headed canes as he once had. At any rate, he had no thought of buying a fresh supply. He kept his coat buttoned to hide the absence of a watch-chain, and trusted to the quality of his ready-mades.

His first call was at Hatchem and Company's, whose soap figured in effigy on the back page of every second-rate magazine in the country. He asked to see the advertising manager, but was asked coldly what his business was. His reply that it was "private" was not regarded as satisfactory. Then he was informed that he could see the second clerk, but that if he absolutely must see the manager, he could send in his card and have an appointment made.

This was Fred's first rebuff. He had no card. Accordingly he went straightway to one of those shops where they print your cards "while you wait," and there had them printed in the best style that the

time would allow, and on the dearest cardboard. They could not be lithographed in the time, but the printing took that form that looks likest script. Fred's bosom swelled as he read the handsome intimation :—

Frederick Gurleigh,
Advertising Agent.
XY Russell Square.

But two unpleasant thoughts at once obtruded themselves. First, had he any right to use the address of his master without permission? Secondly and chiefly, the very wording of the name recalled in the most painful way his experiences of yesterday. He felt inclined to have a new set of cards printed, with a comfortably misleading name and address; but time was pressing. After all, he had never done anything that gave the police a right to interfere with him. Further, it is wonderful how differently he felt towards the police now that he had a good coat on his back. He resolved to take his chance.

He next called on "Cocoon Pills Company, Limited." As before, he asked for the advertising manager; and,

as before, he was asked his business. He gave his card, and mentioned that he had a very special offer to make. The reply came back that very special offers were better made in writing. To his remonstrance that his offer was an exclusive one, and could not be submitted for competition along with a crowd of others, the answer came back that he could please himself about submitting his special offer.

Things were not going just as Fred had expected. He had thought that his chief difficulty would be to convince his clients that he could perform the wonder that he promised, and he had prepared admirable and convincing arguments. He had not anticipated this preliminary block. His next call was at Tomlinson's, the well-known advertising agent. This time he did not use his card. He felt that it would be out of place. Fortunately there was no difficulty in this case. An advertising agent is a very accessible person. As Fred was led along that very corridor in which he had so recently sat and written those thousand circulars for that eagerly-coveted half-crown, he shivered, and wondered if he would ever again be reduced to sit at that miserable little table and be glad of the chance.

This was not a good preparation for facing the

great Tomlinson, who sat in state behind a large roll-top desk and gazed benignantly at his visitor. His gaze always began benignantly. Its development depended on various things. As he confined himself to benignity, Fred found himself compelled to open the conversation.

“I have called, Mr. Tomlinson, on you, because you—you know advertising.”

The beginning was lame, but there was not a loss of more than one degree of benignity in Tomlinson’s face. He still confined himself to benignity, however.

“I have a very special kind of advertisement at my disposal,” went on Fred desperately, noting a fall of about five degrees of benignity when Tomlinson discovered that he had come to offer advertisement, not to buy it, “but I find a great difficulty in gaining access to the proper class of advertisers. So I came to you to see if you would be willing—for a commission, of course—to recommend me how to proceed.”

The mention of commission not only raised the benignity by at least three points, but it led the great man to open his mouth.

“What sort of commission are you prepared to offer? Naturally I cannot have anything to do with

petty little matters. Our affairs are carried on on a large scale here. You are not an editor, I hope."

On this point Fred was glad to be able to give the most satisfactory denial. Regarding the commission he was not quite clear, so he skipped that part, and replied to the agent's remarks about the wholesale character of his business.

"My business is, at any rate, not a small one," went on Fred, gathering boldness from the sum he was about to mention, "since my minimum fee is fifty thousand pounds."

"Fifty thousand fiddlesticks," remarked Tomlinson sententiously. But his respect for his visitor clearly rose. Even a swindler who aims at sums like that is worthy of consideration, if not of respect.

"Of course," added Fred with increasing boldness, "your commission on such a large sum must be infinitely small as percentage, though in absolute amount it will naturally be very respectable."

Tomlinson's respect again perceptibly increased. A man who tries to beat down another usually means business. A swindler always offers excellent terms.

"May I ask what is the nature of the proposed medium of publicity?"

"All my arrangements are completed, and the ad-

vertisement can be made within a week from now, so I need not be afraid of your anticipating my idea if I tell you straight out. My medium is the sky."

Tomlinson's face indicated a complete change from set benignity to set asperity.

"Ten minutes clean wasted," he growled, as he pressed a button on his table.—"James, show this gentleman out."

But this was just the sort of thing Fred was prepared for. So, instead of rising as the porter appeared at the door, he asked quietly—so quietly that James could not hear—"Have you ever heard of Professor Welligham?"

"I'm busy," grunted Tomlinson severely. "What has that got to do with the case?"

"It's he that will do the scientific part of the advertising; but, of course, his name must not appear in the matter in any way. In fact, in the contract there must be a clause binding you down, under a penalty of several thousands, against divulging his connection with our operations."

"I'll ring for you in a moment, James."

James discreetly withdrew.

"Now, what's this about Professor Welligham?"

"Just this, that he has offered to write upon the

sky, by means of what he calls the second remove, any advertisement to the length of about a hundred words, so that every human being in the British Isles shall be able to read it. The length of exposure will be four hours, and the fee fifty thousand pounds."

"And the amount that must be paid down by the advertisers *before* the exposure is how much?" asked Tomlinson dryly.

"Exactly nothing at all," replied Fred. "We are in a position to offer the most satisfactory terms—payments by results: no exposure, no payment."

"Can this exposure be repeated, or must it be for the one time only?"

"I believe it can be repeated as often as desired, but I need not tell you that the value will go down with each repetition, and—"

"Naturally; and my clients would demand a guarantee that it would not be repeated for a certain period of years."

"Your clients may make any proposal they choose for the copyright of the sky," replied Fred, "but the fee of fifty thousand pounds is for the first performance only, and that unconditionally."

"And if you cannot get this ridiculous fee?"

"The fee is not ridiculous, and we will get it, and

you know it. The only question is whether you will earn any commission on it, or whether I must apply elsewhere."

"No one advertiser could afford the fee. We must arrange a syndicate to buy up the right in this first exhibition."

"That is for you to decide, perhaps. What I want is the fee. For all that you have to do, one per cent. is an excellent commission. Take it or want it. I would not offer you anything like so much, if it were not that I am in a bit of a hurry to get ready cash, and do not feel able to wait on cheaper methods."

"We're talking business," replied Tomlinson, "not sentiment. You wouldn't give me five hundred pounds unless you thought I was worth it. Now that we are coming to terms, I would suggest that we do not approach any of the well-known advertisers. They have all made their names, and an additional advertisement, however good, is not worth what you are asking. You are aware that it is of no use advertising unless you spend at least fifteen thousand pounds on the business. Ten thousand used to be of some use, but nothing under fifteen thousand is a particle of good nowadays. So we must look out for, say, three or four young firms, and

make them pay the fifty thousand among them. You look in to-morrow again at this time, and I shall have an agreement drawn up between you and me *and* Professor Welligham."

"He must be kept out of it entirely," said Fred firmly.

"And what guarantee have I that you will not turn out an impostor?"

"None whatever," replied Fred cheerily, "except that I have no more time to spend in imposing than you have to spend in being imposed on."

Next day Fred appeared promptly at the appointed time, to find that Tomlinson was better than his promise.

"Sit down," said the agent. "I have a great deal to say to you. You have bargained for fifty thousand, of which I am to get five hundred. Now I am prepared to get you offers for one hundred thousand, but only on the condition that I get ten thousand as commission. You have your choice of forty-nine thousand five hundred down, or ninety thousand down. Which is it to be?"

"Are your clients prepared to pay at once?" asked Fred with a business-like sharpness that was not without its effect on the agent.

"To tell the truth, I am in a bit of a box about this affair," he confessed. "Some of my clients are not only willing but eager to have the advertisement at once. Others demand a certain number of months before they are prepared to advertise at all. You see, it all depends on the state of their stock. In a case like this it must be sink or swim. If the advertisement serves its purpose, it must result in an enormous immediate demand for the goods advertised. You can see for yourself that unless a firm is prepared to cope with this demand, an advertisement is worse than useless."

Fred admitted the force of this, and said that he could not decide the matter without consulting his principal. This pleased Tomlinson, who saw in this caution an indication that his dealings with Fred were not likely to end in smoke. He willingly agreed to see Fred in an hour and a half.

When Fred returned, his ultimatum was that if Tomlinson could secure an order for one hundred thousand pounds' worth of advertisements *within the week*, he would be entitled to fifteen thousand pounds of the proceeds as commission.

"The thing can be done," said Tomlinson, rubbing his hands. "Since seeing you I have sounded three

of the most important of my probable offerers for this advertisement. They are specially keen to have immediate publication. Their idea is that the war cannot be long delayed now, and that their enormous stock will go to ruin when once the war has begun. Theirs is not the stuff that people actually need, you know ; when real things are happening, people have no time to think of their little foibles and ailments. These clients have their fingers always on the public pulse, and admit that this last scare about the ultimatum has seriously depressed their sales. The general expectation is that the Allies will now wait for the spring before beginning hostilities, particularly if our government keep up their policy of inaction. This will give my clients a capital opportunity of working off their stock before the war actually breaks out. I think I can manage. What is the earliest date you can give us the show ? ”

Fred could have the performance within three days now, he thought. Thereupon Tomlinson produced a formidable agreement, in which, with much circumlocution, it was “ agreed between Isaac Tomlinson on the one part, and Fred Gurleigh on the other part,” and a great deal more of the same kind.

“ I’ll take it with me,” remarked Fred, as he glanced

at the closely-written document. "I must have legal advice on such an important matter."

"Certainly," replied the other, not ill-pleased to note the carefulness of the younger man, "but you can hardly have it to-day. It will be necessary to get the consent of the firms that intend to take up the affair among them. When these names are filled in, and the representatives of the firms have signed, it will be time enough for you and me to add our signatures."

Next day Fred received the paper, and found, to his surprise, that only one firm figured in it. He had the impression that this firm—a pill-making concern—had made it worth Tomlinson's while to eliminate all competitors, in order that they might have the sky to themselves for the night of the first appearance of what they felt must prove the advertisement of the future. There was no evidence of any unfair means; so Fred, after consultation with Welligham's lawyers, signed the agreement, and set about carrying out his part of the bargain. It was arranged that the display should take the form of a bold poster including only some forty words, and that the display should take place on the following Friday—weather permitting.

We have no desire to give here a gratuitous advertisement to the pills that made their appearance in the sky that Friday evening, for the weather did permit. But the pill-makers will regret this the less that they hardly need any advertisement now. Their stock was sold out within a fortnight after the appearance of their advertisement, and two other stocks had been manufactured and sold before the war actually broke out and spoiled the pill trade for a time.

The consequences for others were not quite so pleasant as for the pill folk. At the beginning of the display a great fear had spread through the land. At first the forms of the letters were not very clear. Welligham had a good deal of difficulty in focusing the letters, and, indeed, from certain standpoints the focusing was never very perfect. But at the beginning the brilliant flashing that went on in the sky gave rise to profound alarm, for no one had the least idea of the first sky advertisement. It had been debated between Tomlinson and his pill-makers whether some notice should not be inserted in all the papers, preparing for the display on Friday. The chief pill man had been keen on having a notice, "Keep an eye on the sky on Friday, and don't forget

that you have a liver." But Tomlinson's advice had gained the day, and the inhabitants of these islands had the benefit of a complete surprise on that eventful Friday evening.

For half an hour no one was sure whether it was the last day, or the reflection of the French camp-fires. When it became clear that the lights were taking the form of written characters, the alarm increased. The last day theory held the field, and many strange things happened in consequence. As soon as the characters became plain enough to be read, a wave of anger swept over the country, a reaction from the wave of fear. Then came a wave of curiosity, mingled with half admiration of the ingenuity of this new mode of advertisement. Nobody had ever heard of this particular kind of pill before—we have already mentioned that it was a young one. But as the advertisement included an exact reproduction of a certificate by a famous London physician (who, by-the-bye, almost died of indignation at the sight of his handwriting flaunting for half the night in the sky), those people who were over-conscious of having a liver at once made up their minds to give this pill a chance. All the druggists had been supplied that day throughout the whole country with large boxes of the

sky-glorified pills, "on approval." Next morning the London pill house was deluged with applications for further supplies.

The advertisement did indeed more than it had bargained for. It had only promised to let the good qualities of the pills become known to the proper quarters; but it went farther. What went wrong we cannot exactly say, and since the events that we are about to record have happened, it is likely that we shall never know now. But the result was plain to everybody. Welligham kept his word to the letter. His writing was seen all over the British Isles for the space of four hours, for he was able to keep up the display for full four hours after the time spent in focusing the letters and frightening the British public. But while everything happened that Welligham had expected, something happened that he had not expected. Something went wrong with the electricity of the world. A strange aroma made itself felt over the whole of Britain just towards the end of the display. This aroma was vaguely pleasant at first, but by-and-by it became nauseous, and Great Britain and Ireland became unanimously sick. There never had been before, and it is fervently to be hoped that there never will be again, a universal

sickness. Welligham and Fred, the cause of it all, did not themselves escape; but the great British public was unaware of this poetic justice, and therefore had no satisfaction in it. Immediately after the display had ceased a thunderstorm broke out such as had never before been seen or heard of. Those who had thought of the end of the world at the beginning of the night were sure they were right now. But the only result of the terrible uproar was the recovery of all the sick people. It appeared to be the effort of nature to restore the proper state of the atmosphere, which had been disturbed by Welligham's performance. He, indeed, seemed to understand precisely what was going on, and even went the length of explaining it to Fred. But beyond a general impression that this was the natural accompaniment of the transference, on a grand scale, of the second remove to the ordinary form, by means of the first remove, he could make nothing of it.

Next morning, people who had never before had the slightest intimation, from within at any rate, that they had a liver, felt inclined to try the new pills; but as the general nausea soon passed away, we may now neglect it, and return to Fred and his master.

There was at first some talk of prosecuting Tom-

linson, Fred, and the pill people ; but as there was at the time no law forbidding the use of the sky, it was felt that it would be fairer to make a law at once forbidding for all time to come this illegitimate use of the British sky. Sweeping penalties were imposed upon all who should make an unfair use of the powers of nature to the detriment of the lieges. Thus at one blow all hope of further gain was taken from Fred and his master. The greed of gain was now upon Fred, who proposed that he should be sent to the United States, where he was sure that he could at one performance secure as much as would keep the greedy machine supplied for a long time.

But Welligham did not share this greed. He had enough money to serve his turn, and did not want more. In point of fact, he had found, now that he had money, that it was almost as good as useless. He found that there were none of the chemicals available that he wished to buy. They were all out of stock, and on inquiry it was discovered that they had been all bought up by Frisaine.

“He does not know how to use them—at least I hope not—but he knows that I require them, and he has put it out of my power to use the money you have gained for me.”

"Could I not get some of the stuff in America?" asked Fred disconsolately.

Welligham brightened up at the suggestion.

"Capital!" he cried. "The American peroxides are more difficult to work, but then we have now plenty of money, so that is of no consequence beyond the necessary delay. And he'll never suspect you of hunting for chemicals, when you have such a good reason to be in America."

"But if it's known that I am over in America for advertising purposes, I shall be interfered with by the authorities."

"No one need know why you are there—nobody but Frisaine, and he does not require to be told. He'll find out in that infernal way of his. In fact, the more secrecy we adopt the more he will be thrown off his guard. If he thinks we are bent on money-making, he will let you alone, and give all his attention to me."

Here, however, Fred's consideration for his master came to the front. He recognized that it would be hardly fair to leave Welligham at the mercy of Frisaine merely for the sake of extra gain. But Welligham was now keen that Fred should go, and pointed out that he would be doing infinitely better

service in America than he could be doing at home. Protection from Frisaine was, after all, only a matter of thew and muscle, while getting a supply of the materials for making panergon was a thing that could be done only by one who knew something about the machine, and Welligham wanted as few people as possible to know his secret in the meantime.

Welligham pointed out that his machine was now really ready, and therefore it would be no longer necessary for him to go abroad making those experiments that led him into danger. He was, therefore, much safer than he had been from Frisaine's attempts.

"Couldn't you use electricity in some way to keep him out?" asked Fred, vaguely enough.

"Quite possibly," replied the old man. "And that reminds me that I had better make sure that anything I do to keep out Frisaine does not do you any harm. I want you to wear a little ornament, just as a precaution when you come home."

Fred was very reluctant to let himself be adorned as the old gentleman desired; but as it was plain that nothing else would give satisfaction, the younger man gave in, and let Welligham put on an ornament,

which it became Fred's most serious business to keep out of sight.

Forty thousand pounds is a large order for chemicals, particularly when the buyer carries the ready money with him. Fred had the money locked up in the strong-room of the ship he went out with, and had for himself a double berth, with no companion. This seemed to him an unnecessary expense; but he could not bear that any one should see his ornament, as might have been the case had anybody seen him dressing.

CHAPTER V.

DR. FORRESTER'S QUEER CASE.

MAYBE a London policeman has no right to be surprised at anything, particularly when on night duty in a low district. Yet it cannot be denied that Constable RS179 was distinctly surprised at what he saw on November 15, 1909, under the red lamp of Dr. Forrester, at 24 Merrigig Street.

It was pure surprise, however, not suspicion; for one does not suspect a man who goes boldly up to a doctor's door, even in the small hours. It was the man's conduct, not his appearance, that gave rise to the surprise. From the opposite corner where the policeman stood, the man looked all right; but when he suddenly made a snap at the bell-pull with his mouth, RS179 thought he was entitled to see more of this interesting proceeding. It is not every night,

even in London, that one sees a non-professional attempt to swallow a bell-pull.

By the time the constable had crossed the street the bell-pull swallower had given up his fierce attempt, and stood back panting. Dawning intelligence gleamed in the policeman's eye.

"'Urt yer 'and, eh?"

"Yuss."

"'Urt both yer 'ands, eh?"

"Yuss."

Satisfied with this proof of his own penetration, and tired with the unusual strain upon his intellect, the constable rested for a little, and confined himself to a careful examination of the bell-swallower's appearance. He had worked conscientiously from the hatless head down as far as the baggy knees of the greasy trousers, when his investigation was interrupted by the opening of the door, apparently of its own accord, in that uncanny way doctors' doors have when answering the night-bell.

Dr. Forrester himself, clad in a dingy yellow dressing-gown, appeared, candle in hand, at the top of the first landing, where he was quite visible to both the constable and the swallower.

Without ceremony the visitor stepped within, and

with some vehemence kicked the door shut right in the face of RS179, who quietly resumed his walk round his beat. The man was safe in the doctor's hands, and was interesting to the constable only in so far as he had supplied something to talk about to Mrs. RS179.

Meanwhile the doctor had guided his visitor into the consulting-room, which stood on the ground floor just at the right hand of the entrance. Probably a London doctor has even less right than a London policeman to be surprised at anything, yet Dr. Forrester could not help being surprised when he had finished a rapid survey of the newcomer's appearance. Being a quicker man than the constable, he had at once noticed that the caller had no shoes. Remarkable at any time, this lack in the cold of winter seemed to the doctor somewhat suspicious.

"Well, my man, what can I do for you?"

"It's my awms, doc."

"What's the matter?"

"That's wot I've come ter you for."

"Yes, but what has happened? Have you fallen? Have you any pain?"

As he spoke the doctor took hold of one of the

arms and moved it gently in various directions. It appeared to move easily and naturally enough, and the patient declared that he felt no pain.

"Then what's the matter? Why do you come here?" Dr. Forrester was getting impatient.

"'Cos it won't work, I tell yer," growled the patient, in a tone more irritable than the doctor's own.

As a matter of fact, when Forrester looked closely into the man's face, he saw clearly that only a horrible fear kept him from breaking out savagely.

"Won't work," muttered the doctor, removing the patient's greasy coat. "It can't be G.P.; the legs—"

"How did you get here?"

"Easy 'nough. I jus' came along Jerryson Street, an'—"

"I mean, did you walk, or—"

"Wawrk? Naw; I ran."

"Hum! ran! No pain in the legs, or—"

"No pain 'tall, doc.; on'y they *won't* work."

By this time the doctor had exposed the two arms, and to his surprise found that they seemed in every way normal. Temperature and colour and feel were all ordinary, yet the man maintained that he had no power over them.

"When did you notice the loss of power?"

" 'Bout 'arf a nour ago."

" What were you doing at the time ? "

Up till now the patient had answered freely, if irritably. But at this point he became very uneasy. He remarked with emphasis that what he wanted was to recover the use of what he called his fore-feet, and not to answer nonsensical questions.

Forrester explained, after the manner of doctors, that unless he was intrusted with the facts of the case he could be of no use. Then he suggested that the patient might try elsewhere.

The suggestion did not seem to be acceptable to the helpless one, who tried a new tack by asking the doctor if he could keep a secret. Forrester replied gravely that it was a doctor's business to keep his patients' secrets. It appeared, however, that the secret in question was of a very special character, and required a deal of keeping. The doctor tried to make it quite clear that all secrets were safe in his professional keeping, and soon was sorry he had succeeded in gaining his patient's confidence, for it came out that the unfortunate accident had occurred in the way of business, but that this business was not of a popular character. In point of fact, the man had come by his mischief while "cracking a crib."

On being pressed, the man explained that there was a sort of machine in the room in which he had been operating, and that it must have been this machine that had "taken the pins" from his two companions.

"So there were other two of you?"

"Yuss."

"And you came here in the hope of getting put right, and left them to be caught!"

"If you'd put me right, I'd 'a gone back for 'em."

"They're still there, then? Suppose we go and see them? Once I see the machine, we may find some way of helping you."

Very unwillingly the patient was driven to yield, and agreed to lead the doctor to the scene of the disaster.

On the way Forrester tried to discover as much as he could about the case. At first his companion was very reticent, but by-and-by he opened out, and indeed became rather garrulous. It soon became clear that his main purpose was to put as good a face on his doings as was possible; and, in truth, Forrester was relieved to find that his services were not being called in to assist law-breakers against law-keepers.

It appeared that the injured man—who, by the way, intimated his willingness to answer to the name of Dick—and some friends had had their eyes for some time on an old man who had recently taken the whole of the top flat of a high tenement in Warpinger's Lane. They had been suspicious of him from the first, and had soon found confirmation of their suspicions. A "bloke" who had white hair and plenty of money did not naturally choose Warpinger's Lane as a suitable place in which to end his days. At first it was just possible that he might turn out to be that species of "bloke" who knows no better than to sacrifice himself for the good of others. And if this had turned out to be the true state of affairs, no one would have been more annoyed than Dick. But careful watching showed that certain parcels were sent up to the stranger's flat, and that at all hours of the evening, but never by daylight. In Warpinger's Lane parcels are such rarities that it is easy to trace their source. The old gentleman rose greatly in the opinion of his neighbours when it was found that the mysterious parcels and boxes came from certain chemical warehouses.

It is not for a moment to be supposed that science

was responsible in any way for the added respect for the newcomer. His neighbours knew better. They understood what the steady pouring out of smoke from a certain chimney meant, even if they had not had intelligence to interpret the sounds of metal-work that were often to be heard from the attic. In fact, they thought that the old gentleman was *too* open, and they remarked to one another that it would not last long. The police would very soon be down upon their old neighbour, and make a clean sweep of him and his counterfeiting apparatus.

They had enough fellow-feeling to make them think that this would be a pity, but this fellow-feeling developed in quite an unexpected direction. It was felt, Dick explained, that it would be a pity for the police to have the whole haul to themselves. Accordingly, Dick and his companions had resolved to anticipate the inevitable raid, and have a little of the plunder to themselves. All that they had meant to do was to take as much good money as they could find, and as much counterfeit as they thought safe. They had no thought of permanently cramping the counterfeiting business. It seemed to them a piece of uncommonly good luck that the old counterfeiter should have

come into their quarter. It was really an invitation to men of enterprise. They looked upon their expedition much in the same light as a Border black-mailer might. They were only making the old man pay for his footing amongst them.

Dick mentioned that they had had no difficulty in selecting a time when the old man was at business elsewhere—probably, as he believed, disposing of some of his handiwork. The crib was childishly easy to “crack,” it appeared; but the proceedings, after an entrance had been effected, did not seem to stand out very clearly in the mind of the unfortunate Dick.

The one thing that was distinct was that there was a machine—not a common sort of machine, but one that required a good deal of warm but not very lucid description. Dick was not so much concerned in letting the doctor know what the nature of the machine was, as in expressing his indignation at the keeping of such things in a respectable counterfeiter's establishment. Dick was virulently anxious to know what the old “bloke” needed with such a machine, and only accidentally let out his own impression that this machine was intended to play the part of a “bloomin’ ’ouse dorg.” His private opinion of the

meanness of this misapplication of good machinery need not be given here, as it did not tend to edification.

How the machine acted was not at all clear. Dick had no time to enter into particulars of this sort; all that he knew was that the blank thing had suddenly caused his two companions to fall to the ground, and when Dick had hurried forward to help them, the sneaking machine had somehow hit him behind his back. At any rate, when he bent down to pick up his friends, he found that his arms would not work.

He expressed his feelings in his own picturesque way,—

“I can tell yer, I thort I was sent fur, I did, w'en my bloomin' fins stuk an' 'oodn't work.”

It appeared that there had been a sort of council of war, and that it had been resolved that things were too serious to risk letting them alone. Dick had expressed his opinion that doctors were always reasonable “blokes,” not like the sort of “blokes” that wear white chokers.

Forrester knew pretty well how to value this testimony, so he confined himself to a series of questions about the machine that irritated Dick, but brought no satisfactory information.

By-and-by they reached Warpinger's Lane, and climbed the six pairs of stairs that led to the scene of the disaster. The door—the only one on the landing—stood invitingly open. Forrester was about to enter the first door within the long corridor that entered from the landing, but Dick with some violence charged him, football fashion, with his shoulder, thus driving him along the corridor towards the left, with the apologetic remark, "This way, doc."

At the end of the long passage they saw a light on the level of the floor. This, Dick explained, was the dark lantern they had used at the earlier stage of the proceedings. If the doctor would be good enough to pick it up, he might find it handy. Forrester turned the light all round the room. The formidable-looking machine in front of the empty fireplace attracted his attention, but the figure on the floor obviously required his first care.

Dick appeared to be vastly annoyed at something, if Forrester could judge by the virulence of his remarks to the friend on the floor. The cause of his dissatisfaction came out in a moment. It was the unexpected disappearance of one of the three original operators in this enterprise. This missing third was

named Tally. From the evidence of the man who remained on the floor, Dick learned that Tally, after recovering his presence of mind, had made the pleasing discovery that only one of his legs had come by any hurt. Thereafter he had made one or two experiments tending towards some sort of walking. In some way or other he had been able to get out of the room; and thereafter, consequently, his proceedings were beyond the ken of the remaining ruffian, who was naturally indignant that both of his companions were so much better off than he. Dick tried to cheer him up by expressing his opinion.

“’E can’t be far orf, if ’is leg is like my awms.”

Forrester went on with his examination of the man’s legs exactly as if he had him in the hospital. Everything was precisely the same as with Dick’s arms; that is, nothing at all appeared to be the matter with them. He had no idea what was the cause of their loss of power. He had never seen anything the least like this before. He had, like every other doctor, come across many cases in which the patient had foolish notions about not being able to use certain limbs. But these were ordinary nervous cases, which are only attended to on the assumption that there is something wrong with the

patient's wits. Here, however, there was everything to prevent the patient from pretending a weakness that he did not feel. There was every inducement to escape, if only the legs would do their work.

The doctor pulled and pinched and turned and twisted the recalcitrant limbs, but could make nothing of them. Dick meantime grew impatient.

"Wot 'bout my awms, now ye've seen the bloomin' machine an' know all 'bout it?"

"I think I shall send along the ambulance van from the hospital, and—"

"Not much, ye don't," snarled Dick, while the man on the floor joined in to express their joint contempt for a medical man who could do nothing but send his patients to the hospital.

"An' 'e calls 'isself a doctor," sarcastically observed the man on the floor, who, by the way, usually pleaded not guilty under the name of Henryson.

Forrester was about to give them a gentle reminder that a hint from him in the proper quarter at that moment would be exceedingly unpleasant for them. But before they gave him an opportunity of striking in, they both suddenly ceased their snarling, and gave him to understand by signs that the time had come for silence. As all three listened, there could

be no doubt that some one, or rather several people, were coming stealthily upstairs. Forrester was amused to find that he felt as anxious for a moment as his two companions. At a sign from Henryson he darkened his lantern, and the trio waited in silence.

They had not long to wait. Those coming apparently knew their way. In a moment there was a stream of light along the corridor, and the steps became a little less stealthy. The light prevented Forrester from seeing who were coming; but his own impression was that it was the worthy counterfeiter returning after his night's work, maybe with a business friend or two. The doctor was prepared for an interesting scene. It would be quite pleasant to be present at a thieves' "at home," especially when there had been a bit of domestic sharp practice. Now was his chance of seeing how "honour among thieves" worked.

He was disappointed, however, for the new arrivals proved to be allies of the gang to which he had the honour to be temporary physician.

For Tally had not been so disloyal as had appeared. He had made use of his recovered liberty to hurry home, and, as afterwards transpired, by means

of some of the proceeds of their night's work, had hired help for his stricken comrades.

There were three men, and they reported that they had a fourth man and a broad costermonger's barrow in the court. They at once proceeded to lift up Henryson, assuring him that under their tarpaulin he would make an excellent barrowful of vegetables—such a barrowful as no “copper” would think of interfering with.

This cheerful person seized the upper part of Henryson, while a less-cheerful companion took the lower. But, before they had taken two steps, the cheerful one, with an oath, let go his grip, letting his half of Henryson come crashing down upon the floor.

When the hubbub had somewhat subsided, and Henryson had had his say about the conduct of the relief party, Dick sarcastically remarked that the cheerful one need not make such a fuss about things. They had a doctor on the spot who could easily cure his now helpless legs. But when the cheerful one had struggled a little upon the floor, he suddenly gave up his movements and lay quite still.

Bending over the still body, Forrester was forced to admit that everything seemed to point to the fact that the man was dead.

In the middle of his report Forrester's voice trembled. He became silent, and went into a corner, out of the range of the two dark lanterns. The others did not appear to notice, for Dick was volubly discussing some matter of the highest moment to them. The result of the discussion was the sudden seizure of Henryson by the two whole men, and the rapid disappearance of the whole four along the passage.

Forrester was in no hurry to accompany them. He had made the alarming discovery that his own left arm had ceased to respond to his will. It behaved exactly like the limbs of his patients of a moment ago. He had felt no shock. He had not touched the machine. He had merely stood over the dead man, and found that his left arm was powerless. Was this some terribly contagious form of disease that had escaped the knowledge of humanity up to this moment, or was it the work of this wretched machine? Forrester did not profess to make up his mind; but it is significant that he did not go over the room for the lantern that was lying on the floor. He passed, mainly by feeling his way, along the corridor, intending to look up his friend Dr. Centrepoint, and see what he made of this alarming event.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MACHINE RESENTS INTERFERENCE.

AS Forrester groped his way along the corridor, he blamed himself for having had anything to do with people of this kind in a professional way. Naturally he meant in *their* professional way. From the nature of his practice he had a good deal to do with this very class of people, but never in business hours, so to speak. Yet, on looking back on that night's experience, he did not see that he could have acted otherwise than he had done. He could not let even burglars perish unaided when he was called in. To be sure, he reflected grimly, he had not done very much for them after all ; but that was not to the point.

He had got this length with his reflections when he was recalled to the practical affairs of this world in the most unpleasant way. The door at the end of the corridor did not yield when he turned the handle

and pulled. For a moment he was in doubt, but the firmness of the door's resistance soon convinced him that he was making no mistake.

His attempt to open the door had been of the quietest, as he had no desire for the publicity his being discovered there would involve. As he stood motionless, considering what he should do next, he had a very unpleasant sensation. He seemed to hear a door somewhere near him gently open. Then he had that queer feeling of having some one near him that we all know but cannot describe. His first impulse was to turn back for the lantern and make sure of his neighbour; but the memory of what had happened to him already in that dreadful room was quite fresh enough in his mind to make him intensely unwilling to return.

It may seem strange to some that a doctor, above all men, should be afraid in an empty house. But then it must be remembered that poor Forrester had particular reasons to be out of sorts at that moment. You do not mysteriously lose the power of your left arm every day.

"Who's there?" he asked, with quite a fair imitation of a threatening voice.

There was absolutely no reply, and the feeling of

having some one in his immediate neighbourhood passed away.

"I believe my nerve is going," growled he, as he gave a fierce pull at the door. "Which is better—to make a night of it here, or shout?"

Evidently shouting carried the day, for he made such a vigorous attack on the door with fist and foot that the neighbours, even in that non-interfering locality, had to attend.

Certainly Forrester could not long keep up the high level of his din. But he had not had to rest more than twice when he heard a gentle voice on the other side of the door asking what was the matter.

"I'm locked in here, and I want out."

"An' 'oo are you?"

"I'm Dr. Forrester."

"An' is the pore ole man sick?"

"I don't know anything about the poor old man. I have been here attending some people, who have gone away and locked the door by mistake. You must get some one to break open the door. I have hurt my arm."

There was some muttering outside, and then the voice said that if the doctor would have patience for a little it would be all right. He had the necessary

patience. He leaned against the door and thought about what he should do when he got out.

His first inclination was to go at once to the police and give information. But then he remembered his promise to Dick. Further, there floated into his memory a certain declaration he had made when he had graduated at his university. In it, so far as he could remember, he had "solemnly and sincerely declared," among other things, that "I will keep silence as to anything I have seen or heard while visiting the sick that it would be improper to divulge." There could be no doubt that, from his patients' point of view, it would be extremely improper to divulge what he had seen and heard that night. But his patients had behaved towards him with a want of consideration that freed him from all scruple about dealing harshly with them. He resolved to take Centrepont's opinion before he did anything.

Just when he had come to this conclusion, he heard a faint sound at the keyhole. It was repeated once or twice, and then the door swung quietly open, showing a little old man with a bunch of queer, crooked wires in his hand, with one of which he had just turned back the bolt of the lock of the door. The man was certainly a skilled workman. Dr. For-

rester admired the ease with which he had effected an entrance.

"Now, could you lock it as easily?" he asked.

"Nothing easier," was the reply. In a couple of minutes the door was as firmly closed as it had been while Forrester was on the other side of it.

"Look here, my man," said Forrester, handing him a few shillings; "this is for your trouble in getting me so neatly out of that scrape. But I'll give you a piece of advice that is worth even more than the money: don't try to make any use of your skill inside there."

The old man pocketed the money, muttering indignant disclaimers of the implication in the doctor's speech.

"That's all very fine," was the reply, "but I happen to know what I'm talking about. Inside there you'll find a machine that has lamed two men and broken the arms of other two."

The old man looked knowing, and said that maybe his old neighbour knew what he was about when he set traps of that sort to make sure of his premises during absence. In any case it was no concern of decent people like the lock-picker, who was now off to his bed.

"Remember, if anything happens you have yourself

to blame," added Forrester suspiciously, as he made his way cautiously down the stairs.

It is a long way from Warpinger's Lane to Centrepoint's house, and had not Forrester been fortunate enough to meet a belated hansom, it would have been breakfast-time before he had reached his destination. As things turned out, he reached his friend's house about five o'clock in the morning, and greatly astonished that gentleman, who was not at all accustomed to night calls. In fact, Centrepoint was a nerve specialist, and nerve specialists are not usually called upon in the middle of the night. Indeed, had it not been that the caller was a fellow-doctor, word would have been sent that Dr. Centrepoint was not to be disturbed. As it was, the message came down through a sleepy page-boy that the doctor would see the visitor in his bedroom.

"Hullo, Forrester!" called out Centrepoint from beneath the blankets; "what ill wind has blown you here at this time of night?"

"It's morning now," began Forrester. "I've had an accident that is a good deal in your way, I think; so I came straight away to you. I'm sorry to trouble you, but I'm sure you'll be glad to get the first sight of this peculiar case."

"Ah, you're the patient!" cried Centrepont, in quite a different tone, and sitting up at the same moment. "Come, that's different. I thought it was some case of consultation, and I never— But let that stand. What is it, and how did it happen?"

Centrepont and Forrester had been fellow-students, but the circumstances of the two were different to start with, and had been getting more different ever since. Yet, while Centrepont was making five times the income of Forrester, the two remained friends in a queer sort of way, though they had little opportunity of seeing each other. The nerve doctor was prepared for a statement of general breakdown through overwork, and had quite made up his mind to send his friend off to the Mediterranean, and help him to go, if that were necessary. He was, accordingly, greatly surprised at the tale Forrester had to tell, and still more so when he had examined the injured limb and found absolutely nothing the matter with it, so far as external symptoms were concerned. He questioned Forrester in every possible way. The answers were in the highest degree clear and satisfactory. What, above all, convinced Centrepont that his friend was under no hallucination was the evident satisfaction Forrester had in finding that even

the great nerve specialist could do no more than he himself.

"Since we cannot do anything at present," said Forrester, pulling on his coat awkwardly over his powerless arm, "what would you recommend me to do about the police?"

"Nothing whatever, in the meantime," was the quick reply. "They would only interfere and send down one of their government jackasses, who would know no more about it than"—here Centrepont saw his blunder, and ended his speech with a laugh at his own expense—"than we do."

Centrepont's idea was to go at once to Warpin-ger's Lane and examine the instrument; but Forrester would not hear of this.

"I'm not a nerve specialist," he admitted, "but I'm a machine specialist as far as this machine goes, and no friend of mine will ever enter that wretched room till some expert in electricity has reported the place safe. An arm's a stiff price to pay for a pretty experiment."

"But there's the dead man lying there. You do not propose to leave the body—'m, not that that matters much; indeed, it would be only a reason the more for reporting the whole thing to the police.

Yes, I fear it must be put into their hands, if you refuse to examine the machine by ourselves."

It was settled that way. Forrester was put to bed for an hour or two to recover from his exhaustion, while Centrepont got up at once and set about consulting all the books he could think of. But he could not find a single reference in any of his books to a case at all like his friend's. He had to give up all hope of help from books, and rely upon what his observation should reveal to him by-and-by.

To satisfy Forrester, Centrepont called in an electrical engineer, who rather pooh-poohed the whole affair.

"If people will meddle with things they know nothing about, what can you expect?" was his only consolation. It was no consolation to Forrester, whose arm remained obstinately powerless, though he had had a vague notion that it might have recovered after a little rest.

When the three arrived at Warpinger's Lane, they were rather taken aback to find that they could not get admission to the upper flat. One would have thought that Forrester would have been prepared for this. After all, the flat did not belong to him, and he had no right to break open the door. Unfor-

tunately, he had no idea where to find the convenient little man who had so skilfully opened and closed the door on the previous night.

The three did not know that their coming had been expected by several of the inhabitants of the tenement. It was quite well known that strange things had happened in the top flat during the night, though it was not as yet guessed how strange. When strange things happen in Warpinger's Lane, an official visit follows as a matter of course. So nobody was surprised at the appearance of three men in silk hats. Everybody took it for granted that they came from the proper quarter; everybody was, therefore, more than ready to do any little service, such as breaking in a door or two.

While our three friends were standing somewhat sheepishly before the closed door, they were surprised by a voice behind them offering help.

"I've got a key as fits most o' the doors 'ereabouts," proclaimed the voice.

"Indeed," replied Centrepont vaguely. He had naturally assumed the command of the expedition, but hardly cared to open proceedings by a daylight burglary. A few moments' whispered counsel with his companions resolved him to accept the help offered.

After one or two well-acted disappointments with his keys, the neighbour found one that exactly suited his purpose; and the three, closely followed by their fellow-burglar, passed along the passage that Forrester could hardly recognize as that of last night. Everything was so commonplace in the cold light of day, that he was quite prepared to find that the machine had disappeared, and that he had been making a great mistake. His arm, unfortunately, gave him no grounds for this belief; and when the party entered the room at the end, they found not only all that Forrester had left, but an unexpected addition.

To the right of the machine, sitting on the body of the unfortunate rescuer of the previous night, was the old man who had been so handy with his picklocks. He had evidently fallen with his back to the wall, and was thus supported in a half life-like attitude, the naturalness of which was increased by the air of wild surprise that had been left on his features. As the three gazed at this startling figure, their assistant murmured, with an awe that his words quite failed to convey,—

“Holy poker! it’s ole Ginger.”

Old Ginger clearly had not believed Forrester’s

warnings, and had paid for his unbelief by meeting this quietly tragic fate.

The electrician was a little nonplused at this sight, so he turned his attention to the machine.

"Looks like an old-fashioned friction machine," he remarked as he approached it; "but I can't make out what he wanted with all this muck."

The muck referred to consisted of a great number of pointed shafts that appeared to spring out of the machine in all directions, giving it quite the appearance of a brass hedgehog. The outer shafts and chains seemed to be arranged round a sort of kernel; but of the nature of this kernel nothing definite could be made out, so dense was the mass of outer appliances. The electrician told Centrepont that the inside was probably made up of the generating wheel; but what astonished him was how any accident could have occurred with a machine of this kind, since the wheel would require to be worked very vigorously in order to produce any force at all. He was busy explaining that he believed the secret of the thing to be that the maker of this machine had probably discovered some way of storing frictional electricity, when the explanation came to a sudden termination. The electrician had examined one side of the

machine, and was passing to the other side, between the machine and the two victims. As he did so he quietly slipped down and took his place beside them.

Centrepoint made a forward movement, but Forrester seized him with all the power of his right arm, and held him back.

"Maybe you'll believe now how dangerous this infernal machine is," he cried, with a certain amount of satisfaction in his tone.

"Yer don't mean ter say 'e's *dead*!" gasped the assistant, more in the background than ever.

"That's just what I do mean to say," replied Forrester. Then, turning to Centrepoint, he went on,—

"I suppose there can be no doubt now that we must call in the police?"

"I suppose not," replied Centrepoint regretfully; "but I *must* be at the *post mortem*."

"Would you mind calling in a constable?" said Forrester, turning round to their silent companion in the rear, who, however, was found to have made his way elsewhere. Either his nerve had given way, or he was eager to be the bearer of such startling news to his friends. Forrester thought that, in any case, it would be better to report the trouble at the police station itself, as this was hardly a matter that could

be handed over to the first helmet one chanced to meet. The two then set out, leaving the door locked behind them, for the man who had disappeared had been good enough to leave the key in the lock.

Driving to the nearest station, they were first amused, then angry, at the pomp and circumstance of their examination. They were made to feel that their conduct had been in the highest degree suspicious. The officials were at no pains to hide their view that the two doctors had acted in a very irregular way, and signs were not lacking that their version of the action of the machine was received with a very large amount of caution.

On their way back to the scene of the trouble, the doctors could not disguise from themselves the fact that they were under arrest. Arrived at the top of the sixth pair of stairs, the inspector and his men received their first unpleasant shock. The door was not locked, as had been reported.

"Your story begins to break down early," said the inspector.

"Yes," replied Centrepont. "The door has certainly been forced since we left."

"Very likely," was the dry reply. But the official swagger was doomed to a speedy collapse. The first

thing that caught the inspector's eye, when he had penetrated as far as the fatal room, was a helmeted figure resting on the top of the bodies that our friends had reported to be there.

It was not difficult for the doctors to guess what had happened. In all probability the man who had disappeared had gone straight for a constable; this constable had been rash. That was all.

The inspector and his men were not at all inclined to be rash. It is true that Centrepont invited them to have a closer view, but it was clear that there was more belief now in the improbable story told at the station.

"You will see that it is now necessary for you to accompany me," said the inspector, with some degree of respect. "We must report this at headquarters."

Turning to his men, he ordered two of them to keep guard at the door, while the others accompanied him and the doctors. There was a moment of hesitation among the men, then a common penny played an important part in the proceedings. Most of the men were in favour of "the best of three," but time permitted nothing more elaborate than "sudden death." The two to whom fate had been unkind stolidly took up their places *outside* the door; the others made their way to report to higher quarters.

CHAPTER VII.

FATE OF THE S.S. "LAURENTIA."

WHEN Fred reached New York he quietly proceeded to one of the good hotels, where his daily bill kept him in a steady state of remorse. He could not help calculating how many days he could have lived happily, in the old hard-up times, on the amount that one day now cost him. But it was necessary to appear where Frisaine could easily trace him, and where it would appear reasonable that he should live while arranging an exceedingly profitable deal in advertisements.

He never knew how the Americans got hold of the fact of who he was. He had set in motion all the wires necessary to procure the required chemicals the moment he had got ashore; but after that he had taken things very coolly.

He expected to have a good deal of difficulty in

arranging for his sky display, and was in no special hurry to begin. But somehow people began to know who he was. First came several enterprising reporters, who promised him that they would give his sky advertisement a lift to the highest rates possible, if only he would give them a few special tips about his methods.

It was in vain that he explained that what he wanted was a little privacy. They misunderstood his drift, and pointed out that he need have no fear about the government interfering, at all events not at first. The government knew their country far too well to interfere with the people's legitimate desire for a new sensation. The governors of the United States were no stick-in-the-mud rulers; they were thoroughly up to date, and wanted to have the best European goods on show at the earliest possible moment. As for the people, the reporters assured him he need have no fear. It was not a trifle like sickness and a mammoth thunderstorm that would turn them away from a new sensation of a startling sort.

Fred told these inquisitive gentlemen as much of the truth as he thought was good for them, and, indeed, was not sorry to have the chance of pitching

his story pretty high, in order that the reports in the London papers should be such as would prove to Frisaine that advertisements were taking up all his attention.

By-and-by, however, the advertisers themselves began to appear. It was no longer Fred who did the hunting; he was now the hunted. He was anxious to keep off the advertisers till he had some chance of getting his supply of chemicals, so he showed himself quite unwilling to treat with any one. As soon as this attitude began to be perceived he was carefully watched by the keen New Yorkers. When it became plain to them that he really wanted to hold off, and was not merely making himself difficult, his price went up at once. He found it very hard to resist the dazzling offers that were made to him. But the enterprising Americans were not to be held off on a mere matter of terms. When private firms had offered all that was possible for them, a grand syndicate was formed for buying up the whole interest in the concern, the syndicate to take all the risks of prohibition by the authorities. Their plan was to keep the sky blazing as long as the authorities passed no law against it; and it was whispered that the syndicate had made private arrangements to

make it very difficult to pass any bill against sky advertisement—so difficult, indeed, that it could not be done till the syndicate had had time to make a gigantic profit. Fred sturdily refused to deal with them, and said that whoever he closed with, it would not be with a syndicate.

This was not a wise remark of Fred's, as he found when, a few days later, the secretary of the syndicate called to renew his offer for the last time. The offer was accompanied by a threat, which took the form of showing him the draft of a bill that the syndicate were prepared to rush through the necessary stages and have made law before Fred could be back from Europe with his apparatus; for, in his desire to gain time, Fred had admitted that he was only the agent in advance, and had to return for the material to carry out the proposed display.

Seeing that there was real danger in this threat, Fred tried to close with the man on the condition that there should be a little delay. The syndicate man was firm. The bargain must be concluded at once, and Fred must start for Europe immediately, and that by the quickest steamer. In fact, it was a concession to let him return at all. Why not wire to send on the stuff? But as Fred was firm about

the necessity of seeing his chief, this point was waived. But all speed must be made. Delay was in the highest degree dangerous. Nobody knew what action the U.S.A. government might adopt if some other syndicate were formed. Besides, the war cloud was darkening every day. As the syndicate man told Fred, the betting was even that France would issue an ultimatum within a month, demanding the withdrawal of the British troops from Egypt.

Since they were to be partners anyway, Fred thought that he could not do better than intrust so much of his secret to Mr. Boosterbeg—for by this name the syndicate man had the misfortune to be called—as would enable that gentleman to lend a hand. That is, he told Mr. Boosterbeg that it was absolutely necessary to have so much in the way of chemicals before he could venture to return to his master.

To Fred's delight, Mr. Boosterbeg assured him that this could be easily arranged. Not that Mr. Boosterbeg had ever even heard of the chemicals in question; but what is the good of being secretary to a billionaire syndicate if you cannot manage a little affair like that on the shortest notice? Every respectable

syndicate in the States, he assured Fred, had its own chemical department.

"Look here," interrupted Fred, in a decided tone, "there's to be no hankey-pankey about this chemical business. My own stuff is on order, and *is* coming, though slowly; and if there is the least fear that your stuff is not exactly what we want, then I remain here till my own stuff comes—syndicate or no syndicate, deal or no deal."

Boosterbeg assured him that he need have no fear. All the same, Mr. Boosterbeg inquired very minutely about Fred's source of supply, and on discovering it, said that he really could help, by using all the power of the syndicate to hurry up the transit of the materials.

Thus it came about that Fred sailed by the *Laurentia*, instead of by the *Appalachia*, as he had arranged with Welligham. Of course he cabled to Welligham, telling him that he had started a week earlier than he had intended, but added that he had succeeded beyond his expectations in the real object of his journey.

With one arrangement of the syndicate Fred did not know whether to be pleased or angry. This was that Mr. Boosterbeg was to accompany him the whole

way to London, to see that no time was lost in returning with the operator and the apparatus. Fred was a little suspicious. Was this long-legged Yankee another inventor sent over to see if he could discover for himself the secret of the sky advertisement, and thus save the syndicate the trouble and expense of buying the right to use it? But, to tell the truth, there was a much more petty reason that made Fred dislike Boosterbeg's company. Fred had arranged with the steamboat people to hire both berths in a particular room, which he would thus have had entirely to himself, just as he had done on the way out. This seems a little luxurious on his part; but when one is in charge of close upon forty thousand pounds' worth of rare chemicals that can be all stuffed into a smallish travelling-bag without perceptibly increasing its weight, one does right to be careful. Besides, as we know, there was another reason.

Mr. Boosterbeg's plan was very simple. He had gone to the steamboat office, given out that he was Fred's friend and had arranged with him to share the berth, paid some extra fees, and had come on board just as the *Laurentia* was starting.

Fred knew he was coming, and had hopes, when he was so late, that he might miss the boat. But

when he was disappointed in this, he asked him where he had secured a berth, as it appeared that the vessel was rather crowded. It was then that Boosterbeg broke the news.

Fred tried to hide his chagrin, but with very imperfect success.

"Cheer up, old man; it's only for six nights," said Boosterbeg consolingly. "By the way, let's toss for the porthole bunk."

"Which is the porthole bunk?" asked Fred coldly.

"Oh, don't give way like that," remarked Mr. Boosterbeg cheerfully. "You can have your chemicals locked up in the strong-room. In fact, I think you should do that, even if you were not afflicted with me."

"I asked which was the porthole bunk," repeated Fred severely.

"Now that I think of it, so you did," admitted Mr. Boosterbeg cheerfully. "Well, the porthole bunk, if you must know, is the first-story one, as it were. It has the advantage of the porthole, but then its occupant misses all the exercise that falls to the lot of the happy winner of the upper lot."

"In other words, the lower bunk is the better?"

"Well, if you put it that way, I daresay it

would plead guilty. Heads or tails for the lower bunk."

"I never toss—at least not now." Fred's correction took away a good deal of the dignity that by right belonged to what he had to say. "As host, the least I can do is to give up the better berth to my guest."

"Now I call that real generous of you," responded Boosterbeg, with or without—Fred could not make up his mind which—a touch of sarcasm.

"But there's one condition I'd like to make," added Fred hesitatingly.

"Why, certainly. Every well-regulated lodging-house has its code of rules. Anything about early rising?"

Fred plainly started. How had this fellow guessed what was in his mind?

"Well, to be perfectly candid, it is about early rising."

Mr. Boosterbeg groaned in the most ostentatious way.

"Of all things in the old world or the new, I detest early rising. When has it to be?"

"You can get up when you please, as late or as early as you like. I prefer to dress *alone*."

Boosterbeg looked at him keenly for a moment, then smilingly replied,—

"Not an uncommon complaint. But you can arrange with the steward about the bath and the other things. Of course you know that it does not really matter a cent to me when I get up. You tell me what you have arranged, and rely upon me falling in every time."

Fred was sufficiently ashamed to feel inclined to apologize, and sufficiently sensible not to. He interviewed the steward as suggested, and the final arrangement was that Boosterbeg should tub first, and dress before Fred. It was considered the better time for Boosterbeg, as determined by the unbiased opinion of the steward.

The first five days of the voyage were uneventful. The only difference from an ordinary run was the element of risk involved in the possibility of a declaration of war before they landed. For the *Laurentia* still flew British colours, though many of the more timid passengers thought that she should have taken advantage of a growing custom, and arranged to run for the meantime under the protection of the stars and stripes. In addition to the usual betting on the number of miles in the day's run, there were certain

little pools arranged for, regarding the possibilities of war by the time England was reached. Every chance of signalling a passing steamer was seized, but the invariable answer was, "Not yet."

During the run Fred had quite got over his dislike to his companion. In fact, his feeling was now all the other way. Boosterbeg gave no indication of an indiscreet curiosity; Fred was allowed to dress in any way that he pleased. Both were content. The American had crossed the Atlantic so often that he felt perfectly at home in the *Laurentia*, and was able to give Fred much valuable information in his own picturesque way.

It was the morning of the day on which they were due at Liverpool. Fred lay in his bunk patiently waiting till his companion would clear out of the lower bunk. Evidently Boosterbeg was lazy on this last morning; for, if Fred could believe his watch, it was now a quarter past the rising hour. To be sure Fred was doubtful about his watch, for he could not remember having heard the steward knock at the door, a ceremony that the steward never omitted, even in the case of men who did not need the attention, as Mr. Boosterbeg certainly did not.

Fred's patience lasted for another quarter of an

hour. Then it struck him that perhaps his companion had risen *earlier* than usual, being the last day on board. Accordingly Fred stretched over the side of his bunk, drew a corner of the lower bunk aside, and peeped in. There his eye met Mr. Boosterbeg's. But the twinkle in Mr. Boosterbeg's eye was entirely gone. In its place was an expression of intense anxiety—one might have almost said fear.

"Lazybones," remarked Fred, resolved not to take any notice of the peculiar expression he had observed on his friend's face. "Aren't you thinking of getting up?"

"Gurleigh," he replied quietly, "something's gone wrong with my underpinning."

"Your underpinning?"

"My legs may be a little plainer. In any case they won't move, let me try as I will. I have been lying here trying to get them to do their duty; but there is evidently a strike on, and they have come out."

By this time Fred was on the floor of the little room, and bending over his unfortunate companion, who persisted in talking lightly of what was evidently a very serious matter.

"I can't even sit up," he remarked, "which I think

is a mean thing of my legs. If I could, I should like extremely to examine the strikers."

Fred understood this as a request, and examined the recalcitrant legs, only to report that they seemed in excellent condition.

"That's what stumps me," replied Boosterbeg, in his usual tones. "My hands can reach down to them, and if my fingers are not bewitched, I am certain that the legs are not cold or stiff. What is their colour?"

"Same as usual, I should say," reported Fred. "Hadn't I better call in the doctor?"

"I suppose it has come to that," murmured Boosterbeg, "though I did think they would have listened to arbitration. I wonder what has come over the steward this morning. I would have sent him instead of troubling you."

"Did he not knock?"

"I didn't hear him, and as I have been lying waiting for his knock for some little time— But it doesn't matter. I wonder if it's bigger wages or shorter hours that the beggars want. I believe it's the lazy life on shipboard that has put this into their heads."

By this time Fred had hurried on some clothes

and was ready to start on his hunt for the doctor. Suddenly it struck him how callous he had been. No doubt it was Boosterbeg's quietness that had prevented his thinking of it before.

"By the way, do you—eh—that is, have you—is it very painful?"

"That's the rum thing about it. There's nary a pain. They've just come out, leaving me to complete my contracts without them, but they've done no damage to stock or machinery."

Somewhat relieved, Fred hurried off on his search. In his present undress he naturally sought out the most retired ways in his hunt for the doctor. But it seemed as if he need not have exercised quite so much caution. At first his main object had been to avoid meeting any one; soon he was eager to catch sight of any one at all. Looking into the smoking-room as he passed, he saw three or four men loafing about in very peculiar attitudes. In one of the corridors he nearly fell over a steward, who was lying there at full length. The doctor's cabin was locked, and no amount of knocking made any impression.

"Most peculiar," remarked Fred, venturing to give a vigorous rat-tat at one of the officers' cabin doors, in the hope of calling out some help. He knew that he

had no right to knock there, but he was desperate, and there are times when little ceremonial laws may be disregarded. Even this daring proceeding produced no result. Fred now turned his attention elsewhere. He dashed up the companion-way to the deck, only to find himself as solitary as before.

Rushing along to where he could command a view of the officer on the bridge, he was horrified to find that there was no officer there. Turning to the steering gear, he was still more amazed to find that it too had to take care of itself. On closer inspection he found that a man's body lay at the foot of the little wheel that controlled the direction of the big ship. As things now stood, it was evident that the *Laurentia* was left entirely to her own devices. She might run into another vessel at any moment, thought Fred. But this reflection suggested others, and he thought it rather peculiar that he had not noticed before how much slower than usual the engines seemed to be working. The vessel was certainly not making anything like her usual speed. As he gazed round the horizon, he remarked two trails of smoke, indicating passing steamers; but at the *Laurentia's* present rate, and their apparent distance, he anticipated no trouble from them.

He was more interested to find some one on board to whom he might communicate the awful things that had happened. But everywhere that he turned he found nothing but uninterested corpses. He pressed every electric button that he came across, but without the slightest effect. An idea occurred to him. He reached up to the big bell that was used for indicating the watches, and made an enormous din with it—again absolutely without result.

In despair he returned to his berth to consult with his crippled friend.

"Everybody dead," remarked Boosterbeg, when he had heard Fred's report. "So my legs have not really struck work. It's a general lockout. Are there any marks on the bodies you have seen—any swellings, anything out of the common?"

"Nothing whatever. They all look exactly as if they were asleep; that's all."

"And you're sure they aren't?"

"Well, some I shook till their teeth rattled; and as for noise, I think that bell might have wakened the dead."

"I certainly heard something," said Boosterbeg quietly. "But your plan now is to run down to the machine-room and see how things stand there."

If the engineers are asleep, you should shut off the steam till we get some one to take charge of the steering gear."

Fred did not delay a moment; but when he reached the engine-room he realized how helpless he was. Four men were lying on the floor, one of them in a horrible position in relation to the engines. The array of brass rods and taps bewildered Fred. He did not venture to touch any of the things that stood so invitingly before him, waiting to be turned. He hurried back to Boosterbeg for further orders.

Boosterbeg tried to describe the proper crank to turn, but Fred had no confidence in dealing with machinery. He had no head for mechanics, and felt that he would be sure to make a mess.

"It really does not matter," explained Boosterbeg. "The engines cannot go on much longer without the help of the stokers. In fact, if it were not for the fine state in which the engines of a liner are kept, the *Laurentia* would probably have stopped long ago."

All the same, Fred felt very unhappy at the idea of this huge ship stumbling on without any guidance. Accordingly, he proposed to carry Boosterbeg to the

engine-room to see what ought to be done. It was a troublesome business carrying the crippled man up to the deck; for, though Fred was strong, Boosterbeg was big, and there was always the fear of hurting his crippled limbs by bumping them against things on the way.

Arrived on deck, the American bluntly stated that there was no need to go down to the engine-room: the *Laurentia* was slowly coming to a standstill on her own account.

After a little coaching Fred managed to get the ship's siren started to make its abominable din. This was done in the double hope of calling the attention of any passing ship, and also of calling up any member of the ship's company who might have survived the general calamity.

But the booming produced no effect. So Fred was sent to make a tour of the ship, to see if no one was left alive.

"If I've got off with nothing but a slip in the underpinning, there may be others in the same box. All we've seen are dead, but there may be some who are only wounded."

Fred carried out his instructions to the letter. It was long ere he returned, for shaking nearly two

thousand corpses is no small job. When all was done they were no farther on than they were before. Not a single success crowned all Fred's efforts.

The *Laurentia* was now lying like a log in the water. The engines had ceased to work before Fred had well begun his horrible task.

"We must attract attention somehow," said Boosterbeg from the deck-chair in which Fred had installed him. The first thing you have to do is to reverse that ensign at the peak, so that if any steamer comes near enough to take an interest in us, it may know that we want help."

This was easily done; but Boosterbeg was not content with one signal, and neither of the survivors knew where to get the necessary flags for the other masts. A little searching, under the advice of the experienced Boosterbeg, led to the discovery of a box filled with flags of the most distressing vividness and variety.

"In the chart-room you will find a flag-book," explained the cripple. "Break into the drawers, if need be, and bring it here."

Boosterbeg's head and Fred's hands at last succeeded in running up a string of flags that informed all whom it might concern that the *Laurentia* par-

ticularly wanted to speak to any vessel that happened to be passing that way.

"From our position here it is impossible that we should long remain without this invitation being accepted," concluded Boosterbeg, regarding with some satisfaction the stream of gaily-coloured rags that he had arranged. "And now what do you say to a little breakfast?"

Fred had nothing whatever to say. Breakfast had not entered his mind since the moment he had caught Boosterbeg's eye in the lower bunk. It is true that both of the survivors had had a sudden craving for something to keep up their spirits under the terrible strain. But one can hardly call a glass of brandy breakfast, and even two or three glasses do not increase the resemblance to breakfast.

In spite of his coolness Boosterbeg was not very sorry when Fred declined to think of breakfast. Neither of the two was in a condition to eat.

Fred speedily changed the direction of the conversation by asking whether Boosterbeg had any theory about the nature of the catastrophe that had overtaken the ship. The American's theory was that something had gone wrong with the

electricity of the ship, and that the result had been a general shock, from which they two alone had escaped.

His reason for this belief was that none of the bodies had any mark of wound or plague. They looked exactly like some bodies he had once seen that had been killed by the return shock of lightning. He laid great stress on this theory—much more stress than Fred saw any necessity for. The real cause was that Boosterbeg was doing his best to feel assured that it was not a case of plague.

"Not that I am afraid of the plague," he was good enough to explain; "but if it turns out to be any kind of plague, they'll tie us up in some quarantine shed for weeks, and maybe for months; and what will become of our syndicate then?"

"But how do you explain our escape, if it was an electric shock?"

"Oh, as for that, these things do not explain themselves. The important thing is that I am not going to admit any kind of plague—see?"

"But how can we help ourselves? They won't ask our opinion."

"Won't they just! Why, that's the first thing they'll do. I wonder if we couldn't rig up a plausible tale about a terrible shock. What o'clock

shall we make it? Have any of the clocks stopped, by the way?"

"Not that I have noticed. But would this story be quite fair to the relations of the—the rest of us?"

"Oh, as to that, I do not take much stock in what the relatives think. Say, couldn't you manage to launch one of the smallest of these boats, and sail it or row it to the Irish coast? It can't be far off now. We could take your little bag and mine—all that is really worth anything, you know. And then, when all was over, we could step in and claim anything else we may have to leave on board. Yes, that is certainly the best move. My legs could be doctored much better by a land doctor than by a suspicious sea-going fellow with his brain full of plague. And then that quarantine—I don't mind confessing it gives me the jim-jams. What do you say?"

Fred did not say anything. He got up to have a look at the boats referred to. As he very doubtfully gazed at them, his glance chanced to fall over the larboard quarter. The trail of smoke was certainly nearer than it had been the last time he had looked. Yes, there could be no doubt about it.

"There's no good discussing the boats," he replied; "there is a steamer bearing down upon us."

CHAPTER VIII.

FRED ACQUIRES NATIONAL IMPORTANCE.

WITH his binoculars at his eyes, Fred reported to his friend that the approaching steamer was evidently a common "tramp." She was busy hoisting a great variety of flags, which he described while Boosterbeg did his best to make out what they meant from the flag-book. After a good deal of work, the American declared that all the tramp wanted was to know what was the matter.

"And what shall I say?" asked Fred, gazing doubtfully at the pile of flags he had brought from the chest and laid near the deck-chair.

"Well, as you say she's coming up in style, it would be a pity to interrupt her in any way. If we tell her we're practically all dead, she'll sheer off as sure as fate, and we'll be left in the lurch. My idea's to let her come on and find out."

"She's stringing up more flags," reported Fred, again describing their shapes and colours.

After a pause, Boosterbeg mentioned that she was threatening to sheer off unless she got some answer to her signals.

"She won't do it, of course, but it shows she's getting funky. You'd better run to that ensign and dip it two or three times, to show that there's somebody alive here; and after that I'd put away these flags here, in case they feel annoyed when they find that we could have replied and did not."

Fred did exactly as he was told, and then the two waited till the tramp came near enough to hail them. The first question was the very natural one,—

"What do you want?"

To this Fred shouted back, on Boosterbeg's advice,—

"An engineer and half a dozen hands, to work us into port."

"What has gone wrong?" was the next demand.

"Our engineers and crew have met with an accident," was Fred's astounding answer.

By this time the tramp was so close that Fred could read the name at her bow—the *Wanalulu*. Fred himself must have been quite visible from the

Wanalulu's deck. This probably accounted for the next question,—

“Who are you?”

“They miss the gold-banded cap and the brass buttons,” explained Boosterbeg, “and wonder who in thunder you are to be speaking in the name of a liner. Tell them you’re a passenger, and that the accident has extended to the officers as well.”

Fred did as he was told; and after a good deal of impatient ordering and counter-ordering on board the *Wanalulu*, a boat was lowered, and with Fred’s help the *Wanalulu's* chief officer and a couple of men clambered up a rope ladder let down over the *Laurentia's* side.

Still acting under Boosterbeg’s advice (who, by the way, had got himself placed inside one of the deck staterooms out of the way), Fred introduced himself to the officer.

“My name’s Gurleigh.”

“Indeed!” growled the other surlily, evidently determined to be disagreeable. He thought better of it, however, and added, “Mine’s Peterson. Now maybe you’ll tell me plainly what’s happened.”

“Well, captain” (Fred knew quite well that he was only mate, but it was more politic to give him

the higher title), "the fact is that all the crew have met with an accident that has disabled them, and we cannot manage the ship ourselves."

"Who do you mean by *we*?"

"Mr. Boosterbeg, in the stateroom there, and myself."

"But what about the crew and the rest of the passengers? You don't mean to tell me that you're the only passengers on the *Laurentia*?"

"Well, no; but we're the only ones left—after the accident, you know."

"What sort of accident was it?"

"Well, you see, we don't exactly know. All that we know is that it happened last night, or rather early this morning, and that only Mr. Boosterbeg and I have been able to get up this morning."

"Do you mean to say that the whole of the passengers and crew of the *Laurentia* have been so seriously injured that you two alone are able to come on deck?"

"Precisely," replied Fred, delighted to have the opportunity of answering at least one question straight out. "But won't you come and see Mr. Boosterbeg? He cannot walk, but he knows more about ships than I do." Here Fred wiped his brow,

and felt relieved that the responsibility was about to be shifted from his shoulders.

Entering the stateroom, Peterson demanded from Boosterbeg a clearer account of what had happened.

"But, my dear sir, we are not in a position to give any sort of account at all. The thing happened while we were asleep."

"Well, take me to some of the officers who know something about it."

As a distressed look passed between Fred and Boosterbeg, the mate seemed to realize that his treatment of the unfortunates was not quite so considerate as it might have been. After all, they had done nothing wrong, though they had caused him all this bother.

"I—I am sorry I was so rough. I'm told your legs are broken. But maybe Mr. Gurleigh will take me to the captain."

"I'm afraid he's dead," was the mild reply.

"Well, take me to any of the officers."

"I'm afraid they're all dead."

"All dead! What of?"

"Of the accident, of course," replied Boosterbeg quickly. "Didn't Gurleigh tell you about it?"

"He told me that most of the people on board

were injured. He did not say that all the officers were dead."

"Well, they *are*," went on Boosterbeg, "and all the crew, and all the passengers, except Gurleigh and me."

"*All dead!*" repeated the mate, starting back. "Everybody on board a liner dead, except you two?"

"And one of us has lost his legs," explained Boosterbeg, "in the accident."

"What sort of accident was it?"

"An electricity accident, I should say, from the results, and from the state of the bodies."

"What is the state of the bodies?" asked Peterson, in as steady a tone as he could command, considering that his heart was in his mouth. Many men are brave enough in every way, but hate to face horrible sights.

"They're all exactly as if they were asleep. But Gurleigh will take you below. I need hardly ask you to note very carefully what you see, as you will have to give evidence, no doubt, at the inquiry."

This hint was not lost on Peterson, who became a great deal more courteous in his treatment of the two.

When the examination was over, Peterson came up

with a very serious face indeed, and quietly went over the side to his boat, leaving two men on the *Laurentia*. He was rowed back to his own vessel, and in a few minutes the boat was seen returning with six men, but with a different officer in the stern. This officer turned out to be the captain of the *Wanalulu*. He came on board with four of his men, leaving only two in the boat. There were six men now on board the *Laurentia*. Two of them proved to be engineers. These at once set themselves to examine the electrical apparatus of the *Laurentia*.

At the end of the examination the captain with four men approached the stateroom where Fred and Boosterbeg were sitting, and invited Fred to hold out his hands to receive the pair of handcuffs that a man was holding invitingly towards him.

"What does this mean?" demanded Boosterbeg hotly.

"We have a pair for you too," answered the captain sweetly. "It will be necessary to make safe work of two scoundrels who have had the hardihood to poison a whole linerful of people."

To Fred's intense surprise Boosterbeg quietly held out his hands, and said in a half whisper,—

"It's all up ; they've spotted us first turn."

"What's all up ?" demanded Fred angrily.

"It's no manner of good," replied Boosterbeg hopelessly ; "we'd better give in quietly."

"Yes," added the captain dryly. "One of my engineers is a bit of a chemist, and spotted the thing at once."

In spite of himself, Fred grew pale at this. Could it be possible that Frisaine's agents had got at him after all ? The captain appeared to be struck by the guilty look on Fred's face. In any case, he had made up his mind. He told Fred that if he did not take it quietly he would have to take it fighting ; and as Fred thought he would have a poor chance against seven strong men, he took it quietly.

"We'll lock them up here, in this stateroom," ordered the captain. "By the way," he added, turning a glance towards the carafe standing on the table in the room, "*that* water is not poisoned, I suppose ?"

Boosterbeg shook his head sullenly, whereupon the door was locked upon Fred and him.

Outside they heard the captain giving orders to bring over a barrel of fresh water from the *Wanabulu*, and to see that specimens were taken from the

Laurentia's water-tanks for purposes of evidence when the prisoners were handed over to justice.

Inside the stateroom there was a peculiar explanation going on.

"Smart fellow that captain," said Boosterbeg admiringly.

"Glad you think so," replied Fred, trying to move the handcuffs to a position in which they would be less irksome. "I cannot say that my admiration goes so far as yours. And, in short," he added, losing command of himself, "what the dickens do *you* mean?"

"Yes, I thought you didn't quite catch on," replied Boosterbeg coolly, "and it is not to be wondered at, since you did not see the other half of his face when he made that preposterous charge about the poisoned water."

"And what had the other side of the captain's face to do with the preposterous charge?"

"Just this. At the moment he made the charge, the side of his face towards the men and you was, I have no doubt, severe enough; but the side towards me was softened by an unmistakable smile, accompanied by two distinct winks."

"Well?"

“You don’t tumble to it yet? Land! But then you don’t know sailor men as I do, and the captain. Listen to the interpretation of these two winks. It runs something like this: ‘You, Boosterbeg, know what a sailor man is. You know that my men have been thrown into a funk by that ass of a mate of mine. I know that you have no more the plague than I have; but my men don’t take this view. Poisoning two thousand people for no end or purpose is ridiculous. Again my men don’t take this view. Being a sensible man, you will allow yourself to be handcuffed for a few hours, in order to ensure being free at the end of them, and safely ashore.’ I am not quite sure whether the winks did not go farther, and promise that if we were good boys there might come a jolly captain on the sly and open these bracelets. I hope the winks do run to that.”

As a matter of fact the winks were proved to be very literally translated by Boosterbeg. The only point on which he was wrong was that the engineer, and not the captain, came to undo the handcuffs. This engineer was particularly anxious to find out what could have caused the accident. He was convinced that the electricity had nothing to do with it.

"You do not suspect plague?" demanded Booster-beg sarcastically.

"To tell the truth, I don't know. You never do know, in cases like this."

"True for you," replied the American cordially. "By the way, have you come across many cases 'like this'?"

"You have me there. But, plague or no plague, you're not going to be ill-used for long. We hope to make Liverpool early in the morning."

When the *Laurentia*—after all, only eight hours behind her time—came within sight of her berth at Liverpool, the salvage crew were surprised to be signalled to come to, without coming any nearer the shore.

Very shortly afterwards a small government boat came alongside, and several officials clambered on board.

"A clean bill of health, captain?" asked the leader, turning to the salvage captain, who was considerably taken aback by this unexpected incident.

"That's as you take it," he replied. "So far as my salvage crew of six are concerned, we are all well; but with regard to the passengers and crew of the *Laurentia*, they have all met some sort of

accident, and"—here the captain paused for the sake of heightening the effect—"they are all dead but two."

The captain was not disappointed in the effect he produced. What surprised him was the point which roused the astonishment of the officials. When you report the mysterious death of nearly two thousand human beings, you expect people to be surprised at the number of dead; but these strange officials were surprised only at the number of living.

"*Alive*, did you say? Two *alive! alive!* Are you sure?"

"Well, they were last time I saw them. Leastways, one of them was quite alive, and half of the other was, though he said he was dead in the legs."

"Take us to them at once," ordered the leader.

While the interview was going on inside, the six salvage men were trembling without. They felt that they had been miserably misled. The ship was a plague ship after all, and all the salvage money they had been promised would now only go to give them an extra-grand funeral.

Within the stateroom the officials—one of whom was a city doctor, another chief of the police, Captain Blazeby—began an examination of the sur-

vivors at once. But they had hardly begun when Captain Blazeby broke off,—

“We are forgetting orders from headquarters to report every fresh case. This *Laurentia* business is too important. We’d better go ashore at once. Besides, we can have the evidence taken down in due form there.”

As they went over the side to their boat, they were interrupted by the salvage captain, who asked eagerly if the plague had broken out. He was reassured, and his men with him, by the plain statement that the plague had broken out, but that it did not appear to be at all infectious or contagious. No case in the whole country had been reported of its being communicated from one person to another.

When they were all comfortably settled in the chief’s room at the Central Police Station, and the necessary wires had been sent to London, Captain Blazeby leaned back in his chair and asked Fred to tell all he knew about the strange occurrence.

Very briefly, but very pointedly, Fred told his tale. As he went on, he could not fail to see that he was greatly disappointing his auditors. They did not seem at all surprised at his tale of wholesale sudden death; they seemed to be expecting something

more. At the conclusion of his statement he was met by the dry question of Captain Blazeby,—

“So you were asleep the time the whole thing was happening, and saw nothing?”

“Nothing but what I have told you. To me it seems far from nothing. I never wish to see more.”

“Yes, yes. But how did they die? And why didn’t you die?”

“This seems a sore point with you all,” complained Fred. “Evidently we ought to have died, my friend and I. But we really had nothing to do with it one way or the other.”

At this point there was a vigorous knock at the door, followed by the entrance, on invitation, of another official-looking man whom Blazeby greeted cordially.

“Come away, doctor. But I fear my message was a false alarm. This gentleman was *asleep* when two thousand fellow-creatures were dying around him.”

Fred began to feel that he was a perfect Nero. Obviously he had behaved in the most inhumanly callous manner.

“Still,” said the doctor who had entered, “his being on board when all the rest perished is a proof that there is no truth in the unoxygenated air theory. If that zone of unoxygenated air existed, it would be

death for every one who passed through it. It would be either die all or die none.—Did you, Mr.—Mr. Gurleigh, thank you—did you feel any difficulty in breathing at any time during the voyage?”

“Not the least. I felt nothing at all. The voyage was quite an ordinary one. On the evening before the calamity I went to sleep just as usual. In the morning I awoke, and found that I had made the serious blunder of not being dead; that’s all.”

Neither the captain nor the doctor had time to make the reproving remark that quite obviously rose to the lips of each, for at that moment Boosterbeg struck in with,—

“About that unoxygenated theory you speak about—how would it explain the damage to my legs?”

This led to renewed questioning and renewed theorizing, in the midst of which the telephone bell rang. After the usual preliminary fuss at the instrument, the captain turned in a disappointed way to the doctor, and explained that they wanted the survivors to be sent on to headquarters at once, and in as unaltered a state as possible.

Fred grinned as he heard of how he and his friend were to be disposed of, but Boosterbeg interrupted with a mixture of sarcasm and humility.

"Will it alter us too much if we have something to eat, and a decent sleep, before we are examined any more?"

"Dear me, no," replied the doctor quickly, evidently a little ashamed of his thoughtlessness. "But I shall send a note of what you eat. Also, you might give your memories a little exercise in recalling what you have eaten for the past two days."

"What they have told me from London," explained the captain apologetically, "is to see that you do not change your garments, or make any change in the contents of the pockets. Anything about you may be of the first importance."

The two found themselves of even more importance than they had thought. Not only were they wanted in London at once, but a special train was detailed for their accommodation; and the official doctor who had begun the examination was sent with them, to ensure that they should be delivered in that unaltered state on which the London people seemed to have set their hearts.

Two hours after their landing from the *Laurentia*, Fred and Boosterbeg were on their way to their examination in London.

CHAPTER IX.

INTEREST IN FRED'S JEWELLERY.

U^P till now nobody had taken the trouble to explain anything to Fred and his crippled companion. Everybody had been far too much occupied in asking questions to think of answering any. The two survivors had at first felt that they were treated rather as criminals than as sufferers. For Fred it did not matter so much, but for Boosterbeg it was rather bitter to find that no attempt was made to do anything for his limbs. The doctor's sole care seemed to be to find out how the thing had come about. The American, as we have had cause to see, was not given to complaining; so he quietly laid himself down along the side of the railway carriage into which he had been carried, and waited till it would please somebody to tell him what all this meant.

When the train had started, and there was absolutely

nothing more to be done, the guardian doctor at last found the leisure to give some account of the trouble, so far as he knew it. Terrible things had happened, it appeared, during the night that had called away all the ship's company of the *Laurentia*.

The first intimation of disaster came from Paris. Three railway accidents had been already reported in the early morning of the day succeeding the fatal night—that is to say, early on Tuesday morning—in connection with goods trains. In all three cases the damaged trains had deliberately neglected the signals; but as the drivers and stokers and guards had all perished, no explanation could be had of how the accidents had occurred.

This was bad enough; but when the Cherbourg express dashed through Poissy station at full speed, and, neglecting the clearest signals, crashed into a local train that was standing outside the station waiting till the line should be clear, terrible results followed. Not a soul was left alive in the train coming from Cherbourg, while a large number of the passengers in the local train perished. Scarcely had this news been received in Paris, when it was followed by an almost parallel item from Toury, where the express to Orleans had smashed up a

goods train that was shunting. It was reported that the express had arrived at Toury a good deal before its proper time. This accounted for the fact of the goods train being where it was, in the way of the express, but it did not explain why the express had totally disregarded the signals.

All this was distressing enough, but worse was to come. It appeared that the medical examination of the victims disclosed very suspicious circumstances. Many of the bodies showed only too clearly the cause of death. But a large proportion of them bore almost no trace of wounds, while many of them showed no wounds at all. At first the doctors had easily explained this by the simple word "shock;" but no parallel could be found in the annals of railway accidents for the proportion of deaths from this cause. Further, there were two peculiar circumstances that came out. First, the number of uninjured corpses was equally conspicuous in both collisions. Secondly, in both cases this peculiarity was confined to the express. The people in the train which had been run into were badly cut up, but those who were not actually wounded were alive and—apart from the terrible shock they had received—well.

As the morning wore on, news came of still

another calamity on the railway. This time it was in the north of Spain. The early express from Barcelona to Saragossa had neglected the signal at a crossing, and the train had been thrown off the rails. This had happened a few miles from Manresa; and when help had been sent along the line, it was found that not a living soul was left on the train to explain what had occurred. Obviously the theory of shock would not hold here. The train had run into the embankment, and had had its progress stopped somewhat gradually. Only a couple of carriages had been overturned, and of these one had been smashed, while the other was almost uninjured.

This news had at first roused little else than a half-pleased pity in Britain. The relations between France and England were such that there could be but small sympathy between them. Indeed, the newspapers made no secret of the gratification with which they published edition after edition that morning, each containing new and startling tales of further railway accidents. It appeared as if the railway system of France had suddenly and completely broken down. It is true that Spain seemed to share in the misfortune, but that only to a very limited extent.

Up till the afternoon of Tuesday, the prevailing

feeling in Britain was satisfaction at what was taking place across the Channel, mingled with a certain amount of indignation against those writers who had made us so uncomfortable with their tales of the perfect French organization for the invasion of Britain. For the usual predictions and forecasts had been made, and the great superiority of our enemies had been, as usual, fully demonstrated. There was evidently no great fear of French invasion if their railways were in a state like this. Indeed, already a leader had appeared in one of the special editions, maintaining that the rising tide of calamity was itself the direct result of a lack of co-ordination between the military and the civil authorities. Each was acting without consulting the other, with the consequences that we know.

This suspicion was increased when, later on in the day, it became clear that the French authorities were trying to hush up what had really happened. From private sources, however, our government learned that in the forenoon there had been something not far short of a panic in Paris. In the afternoon the panic was too evident to permit of any attempt at concealment.

Train after train had come in from the west

and south-west filled with corpses. Strange tales, too, had come in from the provinces of sudden and unaccountable deaths taking place in the fields, in boats, in the public roads. From Figeac came the startling report that the whole town was dead. The *grande route* from Beauvais to Gisors was reported to be quite impassable from the heaps of corpses of men and animals. From Dourdan and La Motte Beuvron came reports similar to that from Figeac: the townships were literally wiped out. Half of the inhabitants of La Chatre and the whole of the inhabitants of Issoudun were dead.

At a very early stage the word *plague* had been whispered, but by-and-by it was no longer possible to keep it to a whisper. It was passed from mouth to mouth, and led to panic all over France.

There were some reassuring circumstances, however. Nowhere did the bodies bear any trace of disease. In fact, the appearance was so easy and tranquil that the victims had rather the look of sleep than of death.

Naturally the most important question was—Is it contagious or infectious? Here the reports were very contradictory. All those who had been engaged in relieving the trains filled with corpses had escaped

without a single case of infection. There were several hundreds of bodies in Paris that had come by their end through this plague, yet not a single person who had had anything to do with the moving of these bodies had suffered any inconvenience. It is true that Paris was clamouring for the immediate cremation of these bodies ; but the doctors, who kept their heads, sturdily maintained that there was no fear of infection.

On the other hand, the reports from the provinces were of the most disturbing kind. There the plague seemed to be infectious to the highest degree. Men fell down dead, and when their friends came forward to assist them, they fell down beside them. In many places there were piles of bodies. In other cases no harm had come from carrying off the corpses. It was clear that it was not infection but contagion that was to be feared.

Up till afternoon not a single case had occurred in Britain ; but a little after five o'clock a telegram had come from Valentia saying that a sloop had been boarded off the Irish coast there, and found to contain four dead but uninjured men. Their case so exactly resembled that of those reported from France that the panic began to spread through

Britain. Other cases of vessels floating about at the mercy of wind and tide had been reported at different points along the Irish coast. The natural inference was that the plague was advancing from the west, and that in a few days, or mayhap hours, it would be raging in our midst.

Little wonder, then, that the *Laurentia* had met so cold a welcome, and that Fred himself had been handled so carefully. Indeed, he would not have been allowed to land at all had it not been discovered by the involuntary experiments of sailors all along the coast, before the existence of the plague was even suspected, that this plague was not—immediately, at any rate—either infectious or contagious. The men who had boarded vessels full of corpses had in no case come by any harm. Since the plague seemed to act so quickly, it was reasoned, not unnaturally, that if these rescuing sailors were to suffer from it at all, they would have suffered at once. Thus it was that Fred had had a chance to make his present journey.

In fact, the plague theory had already given place to the theory that certain parts of the earth's surface had lost their oxygen, and had therefore become fatal to human beings who came within the

unoxygenated areas. This theory had found great favour, as it fitted in with certain gloomy prognostications that quasi-scientists had been spreading of late.

Fred soon realized how important his escape must appear in the eyes of those interested in the discovery of the real cause of the calamity that was threatening the human race. Accordingly, he was not at all surprised at the great consideration that was shown him on his arrival in London. He was at once handed over to a committee of the most distinguished doctors, who had been chosen to investigate his case in the public interest. The chairman of this committee was Dr. Brandwin.

When Fred had again told his tale, he had anew to undergo the humiliation of seeing disappointment on every face around him; and, in view of the importance attached to his evidence, he himself could hardly help feeling ashamed of his uselessness. But when the doctors intimated that they must make a minute examination of him, in order to discover if he had any peculiarity which might account for his escape when all around him had perished, save only the man in the lower bunk, he had no real reason to object to the examination, but he could not help

being a good deal ashamed of a certain thing that he wore round his neck. In fact, it was because he wore this thing round his neck that he had made the bargain we know of between him and the man in the lower bunk. He could not bear that a plain, common-sense man should see what he had about his neck.

The doctors readily saw that he did not want to be examined; and, from certain instinctive movements he made towards his neck, he led one of the more observant doctors to guess at the cause of his uneasiness.

"As to any little memento round the neck," remarked this doctor pleasantly, "don't trouble about that. We doctors understand these things. Why, you'd be amazed to find how often we come across such things, and in the most unexpected cases too."

He spoke as if it would not be at all an unexpected case to find some memento round the neck of a well-set-up young fellow like Fred. But all the same, when a plain gold ring was found to encircle Fred's neck, the doctors paid a good deal more attention to it than to anything else that transpired during the examination. At first sight it appeared to be a solid ring of plain gold of about

the thickness of a man's little finger. Beyond the fact that it is unusual to wear an ornament of such barbaric massiveness in such a position, the nature of the ring aroused the curiosity of the doctors. While to all appearance quite solid, the ring fitted close to the neck just below the Adam's apple, so as to be completely hidden by the collar when Fred was dressed. The remarkable thing was that the ring accommodated itself to every movement of the neck, so as to cause no inconvenience to the wearer.

"Don't you find the weight of your—eh—ornament a little inconvenient?" asked one of the doctors, after an awkward pause.

"It has no appreciable weight," replied Fred uneasily. He knew that questions must follow, and his business was private.

"How is it fastened?" asked another of the doctors, with a certain awkwardness. It was felt by all that they were on delicate ground.

"I really do not know," replied Fred. "It was fixed on by an expert in London."

Again there was a long and unpleasant pause. By-and-by, the oldest of the doctors, after an inquiring glance at some of his fellows, turned to Fred, and in an apologetic tone went on,—

“Under ordinary circumstances, naturally we would have respected your right to keep your own counsel about your private affairs, but in a national crisis like this we owe it to our country to use every effort to find out the cause of the calamity that seems to threaten the whole nation, if not the whole world. We must ask you to explain under what circumstances you had this ring fixed on. If it is a purely personal matter, you may rely upon us to keep your confidences sacred. But it is worth remarking that what may have been meant for purely emotional—ah—that is—eh—sentimental—reasons, may have unintentionally accomplished other ends.”

“There’s nothing sentimental about it,” cried Fred in desperation. He did not like the quizzical look in Boosterbeg’s eye. “If I must tell the truth, I put the thing on to please an old crank, when I left for the United States.”

“Ah, that’s better,” replied Dr. Brandwin encouragingly. “Now, what sort of crank was this? And did he assign any reason for thus desiring to adorn you?”

“My business with him was of the most private character—not that I know very much about it myself.”

"You will see for yourself that we must insist upon your telling us all that took place when he put this peculiar necklace on you."

"And if I refuse to say anything, what then?"

This evidently took Brandwin a little aback. He had no reply ready, and withdrew for a moment to take counsel with the other officials.

While this consultation went on, Boosterbeg looked inquiringly at Fred, but asked no questions. Fred felt that this companion in misfortune deserved his confidence. He whispered that it was the sky-advertizing man who had given him the ring.

"And this was why you wished to dress alone?"

"Naturally. What would you have thought, now, if you had surprised me with this thing on?"

Boosterbeg merely smiled, and said he had seen queerer ornaments.

Here they were interrupted by the return of Dr. Brandwin, who admitted that he was not at present in a position to extort an answer by legal means. But he told Fred quite plainly that in such a crisis as this there would be no strict adhering to legal niceties. To begin with, Fred would be led away to solitary confinement, and deprived of both food and drink till he chose to open his mouth.

"But this is a return to the Inquisition," gasped Fred.

"I am prepared to run all the legal risks," was the cold reply, "so long as I get such information as shall help us in this clamant need."

Fred proclaimed his willingness to trust the doctor himself and his own friend Boosterbeg, but he firmly declined to make any statement to be written down for public purposes, even if he had to starve for it.

This compromise was accepted by Brandwin, who thereupon dismissed the shorthand writers, and was left alone with Fred and Boosterbeg.

When Fred had told all that he knew, he was relieved to find that Brandwin took quite a friendly view of Welligham's action.

"He evidently meant to guard you against some special machinations of Frisaine, and has succeeded in saving you from some breakdown in the natural forces. This ring has clearly saved your life; and," turning to Boosterbeg, "yours too, as far as it has been saved. Probably the influence of this substance extends a certain distance outwards, and part of your body—fortunately, the most important part—came within its range, thus saving your life without being able to save your extremities. However, there is

no need to theorize about the matter. All we have to do is to call on Welligham. He will, no doubt, be able to explain matters. If he can protect against a force, he can tell us something about that force."

The three then arranged that Fred and Brandwin should at once drive to Russell Square, followed by a cab containing four constables. It was not stated what the work of the constables was to be, and Fred did not inquire.

On reaching Welligham's house, they were astonished to find that he had left home more than a month before, and had not been heard of since. The man at the door was a little indignant that they had not heard this important piece of news.

"It was in all the pipers," he explained.

"Did he leave any word for me?" asked Fred.

"No, sir. And when I saw you now, I thought as you might be able to give us some message from him."

Now the use of the constables became plain. Brandwin had a general search warrant, in virtue of his very special investigation; but it was not required here. The man was so used to searches in the house that one more was neither here nor

there. He recognized the official character of the party, and made no difficulty.

What Fred specially wished to see was the laboratory. If the great machine were there, then Welligham was either dead or done for in some way. But when the machine was found to be absent from its old place, Fred found that he had no definite opinion as to what might have happened. It was possible that Welligham had taken away the machine, and hoped thus to escape the vigilance of his enemy. But then it was equally possible that Frisaine had got the better of Welligham, and possessed himself of the machine.

In any case, it would be well to find out the whereabouts of Frisaine. For such a mysterious person as Fred described Frisaine to be, he was singularly easy to discover. He occupied a suite of rooms in one of those grand buildings with all the appliances of a hotel and all the independence of a private house. Unfortunately, Frisaine was not himself so easy to discover as his rooms. His case was somewhat like Welligham's, only in his case the time was much shorter. He had disappeared only since Tuesday night, while it was now Thursday morning. The professor had been out a great deal

during the past week or two. Nobody knew where he was likely to be; nobody ever did trouble about him—he was so queer. He might turn up at any moment. But even the presence of the police could not quicken any one's memory further.

A representative was left to report immediately if the professor returned, and Fred and Brandwin drove back to headquarters.

CHAPTER X.

THE LINES OF DEATH.

ALL this while the most depressing news was coming in on all hands. Scores of vessels from the Atlantic were reported as having met the same fate as the *Laurentia*. At first it had been hoped that the trouble was confined to the vessels coming from the west, for the French packet steamers had arrived as usual. But it had only too soon been shown that the east had its share of accidents. Not one of the packet steamers from Holland, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, or Scandinavia succeeded in escaping this mysterious sweep of death.

As the telegraph kept on adding information to information, people began to sift out facts that tended to comfort. One thing soon became fairly plain: there were no deaths reported in America at all, either on land or on sea. From the continent

of Europe there was not a single death reported outside of France and Spain. Yet, by an exasperatingly inexplicable contradiction, the only packet steamers that had come in safely were those from France and Spain. It looked almost as if the scourge were acting intelligently, and working on the law of compensation.

Warnings had been sent to all the ports of the world to suspend the sailings of vessels till more should be known about this strange business. These warnings were, of course, immediately attended to on the Continent, so there seemed every prospect that the loss of life from that direction would soon cease. Unfortunately, the Atlantic vessels were beyond the reach of communication, and thousands of men were sailing and steaming all unconsciously to their death. Wild schemes were suggested of sending out tugboats and other small craft to warn approaching vessels. But clearly it would be necessary to find out, in the first place, what to warn them against.

There is no doubt that for the British there was compensation in the reports that filtered through from France, in spite of all the authorities there could do to maintain secrecy. While not a man

on British soil had perished, there had been a terrible mortality across the Channel. Rumours of a great military disaster in France spread with a persistency that almost demanded belief. And yet how could there be a military disaster where there was no enemy and no hostilities? In the midst of this rather pleasant state of suspense regarding the doings of our enemies, the alarming news was sprung upon us that the French Channel Squadron, that had so mysteriously eluded the attentions of our fleet, had been sighted in the North Sea, a few leagues from Aberdeen. The wildest excitement prevailed throughout the country. There had been at the beginning of the war scare a general belief that the French descent would be made in Scotland; but more recent developments had made it so plain that our enemy would not care to operate so far from his base, that the Scotch theory had been abandoned. There was now feverish activity in making our usual "too late" preparations. The newspapers, forgetting that the whole question had been fully discussed in their own columns, and the theory of a Scotch invasion dismissed as chimerical, at once rounded on the government for not foreseeing this move of the enemy.

In some respects the prospect of immediate action with the enemy was a positive relief. Men's minds had been too much exercised with things beyond their comprehension and control. The French were at least real, and could be fought, if not beaten. To be sure it appeared strange that they should attack us at the very moment that their capital was in panic, and without any formal declaration of war. But some of our papers pointed out that we were being attacked precisely because their capital was in a state of panic. It was necessary to take the attention of the Parisians off their own troubles if France was to be saved. Some ingenious persons, indeed, hazarded the theory that the news of deaths from France was false, and had been issued only to lull us into fancied security, while the grand descent was being prepared against Scotland. Unfortunately, the corpses that were hourly being brought in from helpless vessels were mercifully real, and our knowledge of the French panic was not entirely derived from hostile sources.

In the midst of our feverish preparations for the French, there came a startling piece of news that reduced everything to order once more. The French fleet was certainly lying off Aberdeen, but

it was now manned by British seamen. How it had happened no one, of course, could say. All that was known was that some of our smaller vessels, having observed that the French ironclads were all out of drill, and that they were behaving in the most extraordinary fashion, had hit upon the truth. This sudden death had somehow seized the whole French squadron. Thus it came about that H.M.S. *Bottlenose*—a cockleshell of a thing that hardly looked big enough to serve as captain's gig to the smallest of the French ironclads—as being the only representative of the British navy on the spot, took possession of the whole French squadron.

To balance this piece of good news, there came a terrible tale of death from our own fleet—this time, however, accompanied by something in the way of an explanation. Our own Channel Squadron, that had been keeping an eye on the French flotilla at Cherbourg, had been ordered off at once to the North Sea to oppose the French landing. They had passed through the Strait of Dover, and were keeping well out to sea for their northward run, when the leading vessels were observed to behave curiously. The first two vessels sailed majestically on, but the third began signalling

vigorously, stopping short, however, in the middle of the signal, and gradually stopping her progress altogether. The fourth vessel also slowed down, and signalled the others to bring to. This signal also was not completed. But by this time the fleet had realized that something had happened, and brought to in some confusion. None of the advance vessels paid any attention to the signals asking for explanations. The two first vessels, indeed, sailed straight on, regardless of the imperative messages sent from their consorts behind. The second two—those that had signalled—had now stopped, but were lying anyhow, just as wind and tide decided.

Already a suspicion of what had happened had come to the chief officer left on the remainder of the fleet. He gave orders that no vessel was to change her place till further orders. Then he ordered a boat to be lowered, and told the young officer in command of it to row as *slowly* as possible towards the helpless vessels. The young fellow guessed what was in store for him. He knew that he was being sent to his death; but he took his place quietly, and determined that he would come back if caution could save him and

his men. Besides, unless he came back his mission would have been a failure, for nothing would have been learned.

But this young officer, at least, was not called upon to sacrifice his life. He had hardly started when a signal from his ship directed his attention to the vessels he was sent to board. One of them was clearly seen to be moving towards him in a sort of sideways fashion. The explanation afterwards offered—and no doubt it is the true one—was that the officer on the bridge, observing the confusion caused by the sudden signalling of the preceding vessel, had signalled the engineers first to slow and then to reverse, and that this order had been carried out before the end came for all on board.

Here, at last, the death fiend had been caught at work red-handed. Putting himself in the way of the slowly-steaming vessel, the officer was able to board her along with his men, among whom was an engineer, who had been told off for just such duty as now fell to his hand.

What everybody had expected was found to be the case. Not a living soul was left on board. Every man had simply fallen down as he had

stood. When the young officer had reported what he had found, the admiral called a council, at which it was resolved to send forward one of the smaller vessels of the fleet at the slowest pace possible, and with full steam up, ready to reverse the engines at full speed the moment any change took place in the atmospheric or other conditions.

While the report of these occurrences was being prepared, it was noted that the disaster seemed to have taken place almost exactly on the second meridian east of Greenwich. At this point one of the council suggested that it was quite possible that the second meridian might be the line of death, and that there might be a corresponding line to the west of Great Britain. This quite fitted in with what was known of the happenings in France, and in Spain too. The more it was considered, the more probable it became. It quite explained how the French packets still ran with impunity, while the other Continental packets had suffered so severely.

In view of this theory, the plans of the admiral changed. Instead of the comparatively small ship, they chose the biggest line-of-battle ship at their disposal, and arranged to steam at a snail's pace

towards the second meridian. It was proposed to keep all the men abaft of the engines, and to have some animals in an open cage placed at the very bow, so that if anything happened to them, the officers would at once note it, and stop the vessel.

The experiment was entirely successful. The nautical instruments were so accurate that there was no difficulty in determining the precise moment at which the ship reached the meridian. To make quite sure that the death of the animals should be easily determined by sight, it was arranged that the cage should contain two troublesome dogs, the galley cat (only the second best one was given up by the third cook), and three or four fowls. As might have been expected, there was considerable stir in the cage, as the battle-ship steamed forward at almost no rate at all. Indeed, some of the younger officers were inclined to wager that the queer *thanatomometer*, as the ship's surgeon had named the cage, would be useless for its purpose by the time the second meridian was reached. But the "Kilkenny cats" theory was not allowed time to justify itself. There was still a sufficient activity displayed within the cage, accompanied by a corre-

sponding din, when, without a moment's notice, all the combatants laid themselves peacefully down on the bottom of the cage, and the bell imperiously signalled to reverse the engines. There was a moment of suspense before the vessel answered to the new impetus. But no accident occurred. The admiral was convinced that the true limits of the disaster had now been determined, though what the cause of the disaster was remained as obscure as ever.

What had happened to the French fleet proved conclusively that the trouble did not originate in any arrangements of the French. Indeed, by the time the British admiral's report had reached London, it was found to have been anticipated by a report from Paris itself. By bitter experience the truth had been thrust upon the French authorities. A mere glance at the map showed that the scenes of death—except from railway accidents which resulted from the previous death of all in the train—were all to be found exactly in the same north and south line. Had it not been for the fact that French longitude begins from Paris, it would have been guessed sooner that all the places were on the same meridian. But two degrees east longitude from Greenwich is

represented by a fraction of a degree of French longitude west. It was easy to guess at an exact figure like two, but there seemed no reason to suppose a fractional meridian to be a line of death.

The discovery was made at last, all the same, and a terrible effect it had upon France. Here was their country split up into two parts, separated from each other by a line, to cross which was death. Most of the French army was supposed to be in the western portion; but, in the confusion and horror resulting from the discovery of this partition of the country, it leaked out that the massing of troops at Cherbourg was largely a blind. There had to be a great gathering of troops there, it is true; but the purpose had been to make a mere feint of invading Britain, while all the best troops were really to be at the proper time sent down to Marseilles to make a sudden and irresistible descent upon Egypt. Now, as a matter of fact, three-fourths of the French army lay to the west of the line of death, while three-fourths of the food and stores lay to the east. At first this was thought to be fatal; but it was soon pointed out that the stores could be easily sent by train, as if nothing had happened. All that was required was to entrain

the stuff and carry it to within a few hundred yards (or feet, for that matter, for the line of death seemed very rigidly drawn), and send the locomotive along at a slow rate without any driver, so that a new driver could pick it up on the other side.

Naturally there was a wild outcry in France against treacherous England. Many a time before had she proved treacherous, they said; but this time she had outdone herself, and had reached the climax of all possible treachery. What *could* be more treacherous than to spoil such an elegant plan for the seizure of Egypt and a direct attack upon India? The plan was brilliant in the highest degree, and would have succeeded completely had not those treacherous Englishmen struck this under-hand blow.

Then the contemptible way that the *Bottlenose* had captured the whole French squadron—before war had been declared, too! And now the whole Russian fleet, that had proposed to bombard London without taking the trouble to land, was helplessly shut up in the Baltic.

In Britain the main anxiety was now to determine the western meridian of death. It was felt to be a

dangerous plan to send a vessel with the rude thanatometer that the admiral had used, without knowing *about* where the difficulty was likely to arise.

While people were still in doubt what to do, a message from New Zealand threw some light on the subject—rather a lurid light, it is true, but still a light. It appeared that similar deaths had taken place in Otago; and when minute inquiries had been wired out as to the exact longitude, it was returned as 169° east longitude in each case that had been reported. Our scientific men at once came to the conclusion that the lines of death were great circles—that is, they were not confined to one side of the globe, but went right round it, having the centre of the globe for their centre. Now, 169° east longitude corresponds with 11° west longitude, so our scientific men confidently predicted that the western line of death from the British Islands would be found to be the eleventh meridian.

The test was applied, and, as before, with perfect success. The result of this discovery was a wild hurry of wiring to every port in the world, warning vessels against passing certain meridians. The western meridian corresponding to 2° east is 178° west. Up till now no report of death had come from that

meridian; but this was to be expected, since that meridian passes over a part of the earth's surface that is almost entirely covered with water. It was for that reason all the more dangerous for us, whose shipping covers most of the globe.

It was now generally admitted that the world was divided into four sections—two large and two small—and that none of these sections could have any personal dealings with the others. Most of Europe and Africa, and practically the whole of Asia, made up one of the large portions; all America—North and South—made up the other; while the two small portions were made up by the British Isles, half of France, most of Spain, and a portion of Western Africa in the one, and the greater portion of New Zealand and a tiny scrap of North-Eastern Asia in the other. If Britain had arranged this isolation, it looked as if she might have arranged it better. No doubt it had served the purpose of completely breaking up all the French plans. But then Russia was now left with an absolutely free hand to work her will in India, while we could send no help. Then, again, our own supplies were in danger. We have never been without cheerful philosophers who tell us exactly how long we can live on our own resources in

the way of food-stuffs. Now we appeared to be placed for the first time in a position in which we would require to put these calculations to the test.

It was wonderful how soon the nation settled down into its new limitations—that is, as a whole. There were many individuals who could not be comforted when they thought that never again could they look upon the face of their friends; but with private feelings we cannot here deal. The public question was, what was to be done.

With the usual desire to find a scapegoat, the public seemed anxious for a change of government. It was quietly assumed that, in some way or other, we had been responsible for this change in the condition of the world. The mere fact that the lines of death ran along British meridians was in itself enough to make Britons think they had a right to blame their government. The War Office vigorously protested that it had nothing whatever to do with the objectionable limitations laid on the world's communications; but no one seemed to believe them. Something had to be done at once to allay popular excitement.

A Commission of Inquiry was the most natural thing. But it must not be a common commission. It must have full powers, and it must exercise these

powers at once. It was accordingly resolved that a Commission be appointed, consisting of twelve of the most important men in the kingdom, in the departments of war, medicine, and science; and this Commission was to have practically unlimited powers for a week. At the end of that time they were to report their doings to the Cabinet, and, if things permitted, to the country itself.

There was no great eagerness to serve on this Commission. Everybody knew that the Commission would have to bear the whole blame, if it was found impossible to stem the tide of disaster; and everybody had a shrewd idea that its work would not be easy. There was one man, however, who was very eager to be appointed. This was the Minister of War. For reasons best known to himself, he almost insisted on having his name included; and as there was no objection taken to him, no difficulty arose.

CHAPTER XI.

FRISAINÉ ADVISES.

AS soon as the Commission was established there was a meeting held, and at that meeting the Minister of War mentioned that he had a very important statement to make, which he had not thought it prudent to make to the public at large. It was mainly in order that this statement might have its full weight, without unduly exciting the public mind, that he had so eagerly desired to be a member of this Commission.

A certain event had occurred some little time before—an event to which he had attached no importance at the time. A man had come to make an offer at the War Office. It was only one of a score of somewhat similar offers he had had within as many days. Yet, in the light of what had since transpired, he could no longer regard this special offer as anything but of the most vital consequence.

The minister's apologetic attitude astonished all his friends, who were little accustomed to find him anything but brusque and almost unapproachable. He had become unusually long-winded, too. In short, the whole Commission was thoroughly irritated with him before he came to the actual point, which, however, was so very important as to make all forget the previous prosing. The important part of what he said was (and as soon as he reached this point he ceased to be long-winded):—

“In short, this man Welligham came to me with a proposal to pen up either the French, or the Russians, or both, within any meridians I might choose. He could arrange, he maintained, that it would be death for any living creature to cross whichever meridians he operated upon. I ask you, gentlemen, if, *three weeks ago*, a man had made such a proposal to any of you, how would you have treated him? Would you not have done exactly as I did? I took his name and address, and promised that I would look into the matter. You know what that means, and, to tell the whole truth, so did he. He merely told me that I would repent of my conduct, gave me, as he put it, another chance, and then went away. You see I have hidden nothing from you. Clearly, as things have

turned out, I have done wrong; but I do not think that any man who knows anything about the absurd plans that are constantly being submitted to the War Office will blame me."

All the same, the minister looked somewhat anxiously round the council table to see how his colleagues would take his confession. For a few moments nothing was said. As a matter of fact, almost all the members felt slightly indignant with the minister, yet they all felt that his defence was perfect. Three weeks ago each of them would have treated Welligham in exactly the same way.

To break the awkward silence, the chairman of the Commission asked what reward the man had claimed for his proposed services. The minister replied that this question brought out another of the reasons for believing that the man was somewhat deranged. His demand had been fifty thousand pounds down, and the sole right to import certain excessively rare chemicals into this country—chemicals on which no duty is charged, and, indeed, of the existence of which not only the imperial customs but even the imperial ministers are ignorant.

The next question was, Who is this Welligham? To this question also the minister had prepared a

reply. He had clearly seen what sort of examination lay before him when he confessed his blunder, and had made praiseworthy efforts to meet the natural curiosity of the commissioners. He was therefore able to give a fairly satisfactory reply.

“So far as I have been able to learn, since these events have driven me to attach some importance to the man, he is a man of some scientific attainments—formerly professor in our new London University, indeed. From this post he resigned, because he said he had not time to spare from his private investigations; but it is hinted that he was disgusted by the scepticism of his colleagues, who maintained that he was little better than a quack. In fact, I take some little comfort from the knowledge that his fellow-savants were as far mistaken about him as I have been. At a certain comparatively recent meeting of the Royal Society he read a paper which involved quite a revolution in the correlation of certain fluid forces; but his paper was received with something very like not too carefully veiled contempt.”

After this statement, naturally Welligham was very much wanted by the Commission, and wanted at once. It looked almost as if they had now the key of the whole position, and that if they could only interview

this queer scientist, they might get out their report immediately, and make it a very important and practical report too.

While messengers were sent for Welligham, the Commission proceeded to examine Fred and the doctors, from whom they hoped to get some important information. Their information was certainly very important, but not very helpful. The disappearance of Welligham spoiled everything. Fred and Booster-beg were examined till they were thoroughly tired, but they could tell nothing more than we already know, except that Fred could assure the Commission that this meridian machine was not the one on which Welligham was busy at the time he disappeared. The machine that Welligham thought most of was a little one that had to do with men's wills, not with their bodies. At this the Commission, priding themselves on having a little common sense left, were only irritated, and told Fred to keep to the point.

The ring round Fred's neck was naturally of more interest. A report was submitted from two eminent mineralogical chemists, stating that, so far as their very limited opportunities of examining the ring permitted them to judge, it was made of a material, probably a metal, quite outwith the list of chemical

elements at present known to science. They felt very sore on the subject of not being allowed to examine the ring by means of acids, and fire, and other things that chemists are fond of. But the doctors had been firm. This ring had apparently brought Fred through a line which had wrought death on all else, except the part of Boosterbeg that was left alive. An ornament that could accomplish such things must be preserved intact, irrespective of the wishes of two curious though distinguished scientists.

The Commission determined forthwith to experiment with Fred and the ring. It was proposed to send him again through the line of death, to see if he would again survive. Then were to follow certain carefully regulated experiments, in which he was to carry through various animals, at various distances from his gold collar. Remembering some remarks of Welligham, Fred felt pretty certain that the lines of death would not prove fatal against the necklet. He was accordingly quite prepared to be experimented upon.

As soon as Fred was dismissed, an attendant approached the chairman and reported that two doctors—Forrester and Centrepont—wished to give what they considered evidence of the most important char-

acter. Happily Centrepont's name was sufficient to guarantee admission, though it is probable that any one coming with evidence at that time would have been admitted, so anxious were the commissioners to get at the truth.

Forrester now gave a full statement of what we know already, but he went on to tell what had followed. Centrepont had certainly been at the *post mortem*, but it had been held only that morning, and only on one corpse. It was explained that the difficulty had been to get a corpse to hold the *post mortem* on. Several attempts had been made to remove the bodies, but each had resulted in either the death or disablement of the person making the attempt.

The subject of the *post mortem* was not any of the victims that we have already heard of, but a rash young policeman who had attempted to pull out his fellow-constable from among the little heap in that fatal room. He had fallen backwards, and had been pulled away from the deadly machine without doing harm to any one else.

The coroner's verdict was "accidental death," which, while it exonerated everybody from any wilful share in his death, left the cause an open question.

At this point the nerve specialist gave his evidence, which was to the effect that he had had a chance of examining several cases of death by the prevailing scourge, and he was convinced that this death by the Warpinger's Lane machine was of exactly the same nature. The only abnormal feature in both cases was a peculiar and unnatural striation of the nerve-fibres.

The chairman of the Commission wanted to know why a careful examination of the machine had not been made. The reply was that no one could approach it without danger to his life. The house had been locked up, and was carefully guarded outside; though, as Centrepont grimly indicated, there was no great desire to enter it now.

A member of Commission here remarked that if Fred Gurleigh was proof against the general scourge, he ought to be free to examine this machine with impunity. The suggestion was received with great favour. A messenger was hurriedly sent to recall Fred, and the Commission appointed Centrepont, Brandwin, and Forrester to make a complete examination of the Warpinger's Lane machine, with the help of Fred Gurleigh. They received full powers to open any house or arrest any person—to do any-

thing, in short, that would help to throw light upon this terrible subject. Meanwhile the Commission rose, tired and hungry, with orders to resume its sitting next morning to receive the doctors' report.

There had been little difficulty in finding Fred; and the four, followed by a cabful of constables, had proceeded at once to Warpinger's Lane. When Fred had heard the story, he wanted to know why the police had not caught the burglars. He was informed that they had been all duly caught, and were now bemoaning their various woes in the proper place.

"Did they tell what had happened to them?"

They had told the essential parts of their story, but they were much confused about the share the machine had in what happened.

Both Centrepont and Forrester were convinced that they were not telling all they knew, but it was impossible to make them tell any more.

At Warpinger's Lane there was no difficulty in getting in. The policemen on guard looked with mingled pity and respect at the unfortunate gentlemen whose duty took them within the fatal chamber.

On entering, Forrester had a feeling of proprietorship as he led his companions along the, to him,

well-known passage. He felt that it was to some extent his machine, and he was inclined to begin a little speech; but as he looked at Fred his speech died on his lips. It was a horrible thought that in a few moments a fellow-creature was to perform an experiment the result of which might be immediate death. It all depended on a mere hypothesis. If this machine had any connection with the widespread death, then probably Fred would be unhurt; but if not, there would be an additional unit on that ghastly heap in a second or two. Fred was not in too happy a frame of mind himself. Life had become well worth living of late. But he had the courage to show none of his disagreeable reflections. He walked straight over to the heap of victims, and touched one after the other.

Nothing whatever happened.

He then turned his attention to the machine itself. He had no difficulty in recognizing it as the big machine that had formerly stood in Welligham's laboratory. When he had proclaimed this fact to his companions there was joy on every face. First they were honestly glad that Fred was not dead, and next they were delighted that there seemed here a clue to the solution of the whole mystery. They felt that if

they could get at the management of this machine, they were on the fair way to regulate this awful force that threatened to split up the world for all time.

They had brought brilliant electric lamps with them, so that the machine was now subjected to a careful scrutiny that brought to light a feature that had hitherto escaped such superficial observation as the terrible power of the machine had allowed to be spent upon it. A globe of about seven feet in diameter could be dimly seen in the centre of the complicated arms and cranks and chains that surrounded it.

This discovery rather startled all four. Now they felt themselves to be on the very threshold of the discovery. In a few moments Fred was able to report that the globe was a terrestrial one, with the usual seas and countries painted on it.

“Look carefully into it, and see if there is nothing special about the second meridian east and the eleventh west,” advised Brandwin.

Fred was a little irritated at this order. It was hard enough to make out the globe as a whole, but to make out details of this kind behind all those brass spines seemed to be a sheer impossibility.

However, he persevered; and, by twisting himself into various kinds of knots, he at last was able to announce with triumph that he had discovered several pointers like the hands of a clock, and that two of these were moved out from among the others, and were pointing, as nearly as he could judge, the one at 2° east, the other at 11° west.

"Then where are the other pointers?" asked Brandwin.

"They are all bunched together one over the other. Oh, by-the-bye, I see that the other pointers are not joined to the brass rod that runs right through the globe."

"In other words," replied Brandwin, "they are not yet connected like the first two with the source of force, whatever that may be."

"The pointers bend down from the north pole," reported Fred, continuing his examination, "bending to the shape of the globe. I think, if I had a stick of some sort, I could turn them round to any meridian I like."

"I wouldn't try, if I were you," replied a dry voice from the doorway immediately behind the constables that stood at the door of the room; "I really wouldn't. There would be this trifling result, that

every meridian you passed the pointer over would become for the moment a line of death, and I need hardly point out that a moment of death is sufficient to satisfy most of us."

None of the others had any idea who the newcomer was; but Fred had no difficulty in recognizing him, in spite of the change for the worse. He was clearly that Blaise Frisainé that Welligham had so greatly feared. His face was haggard and unshaven. His white moustache no longer bristled in its former military defiance, but hung limply down at the ends. There was an anxious, not to say furtive, expression in the once bold eyes. Things had evidently gone amiss with Blaise Frisainé.

"You appear to know something about this terrible machine," interpolated Brandwin. "You do not happen to be Professor Welligham by any chance?"

"I have not that honour," replied Frisainé grimly. "It would indeed be dearly bought at the price of the sad derangement that has taken place in his cerebral elements."

"What do you mean?" cried Fred, jealous for the honour of his master.

"Come and see," was the cold reply.

He led the doctors and Fred, closely followed by the policemen whom Brandwin had called in, back along the passage to the first door to the right of the entrance from the landing.

"If you care to open that door you will find Professor Welligham inside. He is always at home there to his friends—and enemies."

On entering they saw nothing remarkable, and were inclined to be severe with Frisaine, who on his part was very calm, and contented himself with pointing out by a nod a large wardrobe in the corner. In answer to his look, one of the constables went forward and opened the wardrobe, only to fall back in unconcealed horror.

Huddled up in a corner was the body of a man whom they all assumed to be Welligham. In the case of this body there was no question about the cause of death. The hole in the cranium was only too plain and horrible.

"A pitiful ending for such a brain, Mr. Gurleigh," remarked Frisaine callously, "to be scattered about in this promiscuous way. Ah, Welligham's brain is sadly out of place on this banal waxcloth."

As he spoke he tapped the dead head gently with his foot.

"How dare you touch him with your foot?" demanded Fred hotly.

"I have my reasons, my friend," was the grim reply.

"You know how this murder was committed?" interrupted Brandwin severely.

"I have not that advantage," was the cool reply. "I found him in his present state in the room next to this. I removed him here to be out of the way. My faith! I had no desire to interfere with his much-needed rest. Ah, his was an active brain!"

"You know either too much or too little, sir," growled Brandwin, a good deal annoyed at this fellow's imperturbability. "In any case, you will be good enough to accompany us to headquarters."

"With pleasure; but you will pardon me, I am sure, for reminding you that it is essential that this machine should not be left lying unprotected. Not that it cannot take care of itself when it comes to close quarters," he added, with a sinister smile; "but the danger to the world at large is that something might be done to the machine as a whole."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that this toy is a serious menace to

Europe as it stands. Any interference with it may—
Bah ! it is no affair of mine.”

“ You’ll tell us more of this at headquarters,” answered Brandwin unpleasantly, as he gave three of the constables orders to take Frisainé along with them into a four-wheeler, and drive to the Central Station, where they were to await further orders.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MACHINE PLAYS A NEW PART.

AS soon as he reached headquarters again, Brandwin proceeded to examine Frisaine in presence of a shorthand writer, so that all his evidence might be put upon record for the consideration of the Commission next morning. Frisaine made no objection; but Centrepont, after a careful look at the witness, suggested that he should be allowed an opportunity of attending to his toilet. Brandwin felt a little ashamed of having overlooked the claims of humanity in his eagerness to get at the truth. He apologized to Frisaine, and blamed the excitement of the past few hours for the neglect. Frisaine's reply rather startled them all.

“As I have had no food for a couple of days, I shall be glad to eat a little, if you will depute one of your men to feed me.”

"Feed you!" gasped Brandwin, in bitter disappointment. He had hoped for such important information from this witness, and now it seemed to be a case of pure imbecility.

"Yes. You see I have had the misfortune to interfere with a machine that I did not understand. I have paid for my folly by the loss of all power over my arms."

All turned their attention to the professor's arms, and were astonished that they had not before noticed how peculiarly they hung. Under ordinary circumstances the discovery would have been made at once. Only the prevailing excitement had kept all eyes blind.

The three doctors took Frisaine into a private room and attended to him themselves. His symptoms were exactly those of the unfortunate Dick and of Forrester himself. After everything had been done for the witness that food and drink and fresh water could accomplish, he was again brought into the room where the shorthand writer waited.

His statement was clear and pointed. He had been for long a rival of Welligham. They had been working on parallel lines—at least Frisaine had thought they were parallel; he had changed his mind on that

point since. He had tried several times to get access to Welligham's notes, but had been only partially successful. (All this he said in a matter-of-fact way, as if he were telling the most natural thing in the world. He had none of the air of making a confession.) Welligham had made the mistake of trying to escape from Frisaine's observation by a midnight removal from Russell Square to Warpinger's Lane.

"As if it were possible to escape my surveillance. Why, two of the men who assisted at the removal of the apparatus were in my employment," remarked Frisaine with some complacency.

By means of his spies Frisaine had discovered everything that Welligham had done, and knew to the minutest detail the contents of every parcel that was delivered at Warpinger's Lane. Things were going just as Frisaine desired, when the murder of Welligham had upset all his plans.

"Why, I was under the impression that you had murdered him," interposed the candid Brandwin.

"Ah, a natural but erroneous inference. The time for that had not come. It was emphatically premature. The man had not completed his work—at least I then thought he had not."

"Am I to infer, then, that after he had completed his work you would have——"

"Is not this a little irrelevant?" inquired Frisaine, without showing the least feeling at the innuendo.

"Go on," was the curt reply.

"When I was informed of the blunder these ruffians had made in thinking to make profit out of the plunder of a laboratory, I at once went to Welligham's place, to see if any serious harm had been done. Unfortunately, my spy had been insufficiently informed. The two vital points escaped him altogether. First, he did not know that Welligham was dead; in the next place, he did not give me any hint of what had happened to the thieves. Had my man been worthy of his reputation, I would not be here to-day."

"Do you mean that you would have escaped to France?"

"I mean that it would have been worth my while to continue the fight. Life is not so interesting to me since I carelessly examined that machine. But, after all, I need not blame my man for going wrong where I myself was at fault. I thought I understood Welligham's plans, and it turns out that we have been working on totally different lines. I thought he was only approaching the completion of this

machine that has cost me so dear, while it appears that he has had it completed for years, and had laid it aside till an occasion should arise for using it."

"Then why was he so afraid of your finding out what he was working at?"

"It seems that his work of late has been on some sort of fantastical machine for obtaining a physical force that will control the wills of others. All the chemicals he had been using were for this purpose, and, as you may imagine, all my attempts to apply his chemicals to the machine I was working at only led me farther astray."

"Am I to understand, then, that you have a machine something like this dangerous one in Warpinger's Lane?"

This question was the first that produced any effect upon Frisaine. He appeared to feel the humiliation of confessing that he wanted to make such a machine, but had hitherto failed, for the reasons he had just stated, to produce what he wanted.

"You understand, to some extent at least, the use of this machine, then?" persisted Brandwin.

"I know the general idea of the machine, but there is very much about it that I do not understand. I know how it works as it stands, but I do not know

how to generate the power upon which its value depends, nor how to form the necessary connections."

"Would you mind giving us some idea of how the thing works?"

The professor's account was clear enough, I suppose; but it was terribly long-winded, and bristled with dictionary-compelling words. The sum of it was that the brass axis of the model globe in the machine was parallel to the real axis of the earth, and was therefore able to distribute by induction a force that Welligham had named *panergon*. This force exists in enormous abundance, stored up in the cohesive forces that keep the molecules of all matter from falling apart from one another. A comparatively small initial force could, by parallelism, develop an enormous inductive charge. Up till now Frisaine had not been able to discover how to raise this initial charge, but it appeared that Welligham had been more fortunate. Stored up in that machine was sufficient *panergon* to destroy all the life on the globe.

"How does this *panergon* act?" asked Brandwin.

"As you see," replied Frisaine, glancing suggestively at his helpless arms.

"But why are you and the burglars not dead, like

those in the *Laurentia*, if the force is the same in both cases ? ”

“ That I think I can explain. The force acts only on the part submitted to its influence. Since those in the vessel passed entirely through the plane of panergic influence that has been established on the two meridians at which the pointers stand, every living creature on board came under its influence portion by portion, and therefore totally perished ; whereas, in the case of those who approached too near this machine, there was no danger save when any part of the body came within the plane of the corresponding meridians of the *model*, and that within a sufficiently small distance to experience the effects of the *direct* influence of panergon. In short, my misfortune is the result of the panergon actually stored in that globe. The greater disasters are the work of the enormous force of panergon let loose by induction.”

“ When you knew all this about the machine, how does it come about that you yourself received this injury ? ” demanded Brandwin.

“ As I told you, I was not aware that the machine was in working order. Further, I did not know quite so much about the machine till I had examined it.”

"By the way," put in Centrepont, "how did you contrive to get into the house at Warpinger's Lane to examine the machine? The place was guarded by policemen, I understand."

"I have been in that accursed place all the time—that is, I came in just before the policemen were placed on duty, and have remained there till your coming showed me the possibility of still greater calamities following from the careless examination of the machine. I had thought that perhaps I might hit upon some way of working out an advantage to France from the machine; but my ignorance of the source of the force, and the loss of my arms, made me give up the attempt."

"What is to be done now?"

Frisaine shrugged his shoulders.

"Have you any advice to offer? I understand that you do not wish to involve the world in any greater calamity."

"One piece of advice I have already given: do not tamper with the machine. Especially do not try to move the pointers. This will merely result in the rotation of the plane of death round the earth's axis through just as many degrees as are contained in the arc through which the pointers are turned."

"How would it do," asked Forrester practically, "if we were to blow up the whole thing?"

"I should say that it would result in the immediate and painless death of every living creature within a radius of six hundred miles at least. If the area of destruction had been somewhat smaller, I do not know but that I would have already tried the experiment. Unfortunately, the actual radius would include too many of my friends for me to encourage the blowing-up process."

"But if it is the machine that causes the trouble, how could the trouble still arise when the machine is in a million atoms?"

"The purpose of the machine is not to generate the force, but merely to distribute it—that is, to apply it at the places where it is required. By destroying the machine you would only set free the amount of panergon stored up in it. This panergon would therefore work its will from the centre outwards, as far as its power was sufficient to act at all. That distance I calculate to be about six hundred miles. Oh, I assure you, gentlemen, that if there had been any chance of saving France without—'m—without saving England, I should not have appeared so opportunely to warn you against your

rash interference with this charming Machine Wel-
ligham."

Nothing more was to be got out of Frisaine; but the Commission next morning thought that quite enough had been discovered to keep it very busy for some time. The element of mystery had, no doubt, disappeared from the case, but only to have its place taken by the most distressing uncertainty about how to act. It was a new sensation to know that in the middle of London there existed a sort of bomb that at any moment, for all they knew to the contrary, might go off in innocent silence, with the result that a circle of twelve hundred miles' diameter would be at once filled with corpses. It was unanimously agreed that the matter was to be kept perfectly secret. The nation was excited enough already; it would go mad if this new development were made public.

Thus it came about that Henryson, Tally, and Dick, contrary to all the rights that the Habeas Corpus Act confers upon British subjects, even those of doubtful professions, were denied the privilege of a fair trial. At the private inquiry at which they were examined, the truth had come out. Dick and Tally rounded on Henryson, who had struck the fatal

blow. They all protested that they had had no intention of injuring the old counterfeiter, as they regarded Welligham. He had been so savage, however, that they had been forced to give him a little tap on the head to soothe him. While they were busy at work, the effect of the blow evidently passed away, and the old man had sprung at the machine, and had done something to it, before they could get at him. They could not say exactly what he had done to the machine. All they knew was that he appeared to be greatly pleased at what he had done. Henryson had then given the final tap at the old man's head. After dragging the body into the room where Frisaine found it, they had returned to the machine, expecting to find there the money and precious metals they were searching for. What they got we know.

The Commission decided that, in the meantime, the three should be kept in solitary confinement. There was plenty of time to deal with them by-and-by. Frisaine, too, being a Frenchman, had no claim on the rights of Habeas Corpus, so the Commission had small compunction in keeping him in luxurious though solitary confinement.

The activity of the Commission did not end here. The whole of the tenement in Warpinger's Lane was

acquired for the nation—that is, the proprietor received half as much again as his property was worth—and the poor tenants had to clear out at a day's notice. This was hard, but there could be no dallying with an instrument like that on the top flat. From the fact that not a word of complaint was ever heard from the poor tenants thus ruthlessly turned into the street, it is only reasonable to guess that the Commission wisely used the power they had of spending money. Any price was cheap for the safety of that terrible machine.

Many ingenious expedients were suggested by various members of the Commission. Of these the most practicable was to deport the whole machine to the middle of the Pacific, and there sink it to the bottom, accompanied by an enormous overcharge of various kinds of explosives, supplied with the necessary machines to explode the whole at such a time as would give the vessel a start of more than six hundred miles from the spot where the machine was sunk. Naturally, it would be necessary to give warning of what was about to be done, so that for a certain length of time no vessel should approach within the danger circle of six hundred miles' radius. It was felt, indeed, that it would be safer to make

the circle a thousand miles' radius, so as to be quite sure. Before this could be carried into effect, of course, the people would require to be informed of the whole circumstances. But it was proposed that the secret should not be divulged till the vessel with the machine on board had already left Britain, and was beyond range.

This plan was less outrageous than at first sight it might seem ; for it was known that the machine had been once at least removed from one part of London to another without doing any damage to any one. It is true that it might not have been charged at the time. But it was felt that something must be risked.

Frisaine, however, pointed out that the machine had been previously taken asunder, at its last removal, and therefore nothing could be argued from that. Further, the change of position of the machine would involve a change of the direction of the axis, and what the effect of that change might be Frisaine was not prepared to say.

This was discouraging ; but some comfort was found in the advice of one of the members of Commission, who happened to be a large consumer of electricity. His experience was, he said, that the main difficulty with these new-fangled forces was

not to get rid of them, but to keep them. His belief was that if they had patience, and did not go hunting up more of this panergon, they would find that the machine would in a very short time become exhausted, and the lines of death would quietly die out.

When he was asked what he considered a "short time," he declined to say. They knew English as well as he.

His advice was received with a good deal of favour: the advice to let things go on as they are always does find favour. The more active members, however, would not consent to this purely negative line of action.

It was in the spirit of compromise that another member suggested that they might wait for the exhaustion of the machine, as his friend had suggested, but that in the meantime they might devote their attention to the discovery of the nature and properties of the ring, that seemed to have been instrumental in saving the life of Mr. Gurleigh. If each of the inhabitants of these islands were provided with a similar ring, all danger for us would disappear, while the danger would remain for France and all our enemies abroad. In fact, these rings, if properly used, might be made to secure our commercial

supremacy in such a way that the lines of death would turn out to be a great advantage to us in our struggles against foreign competition.

The practical outcome of the deliberations of the Commission was that several of the best chemical mineralogists of the country were appointed to do all that they could to produce a facsimile of Fred's ring. This order was coupled with the former restriction that the pattern ring was not to be in any way tampered with. Its value was now regarded as even greater than before, since so much depended on having at least one man able to deal with this dangerous machine, and, if need be, form a personal connecting link with the rest of the world.

Further, Fred was ordered to examine the machine as carefully as possible, and to report specially on the possibilities of lifting and conveying it. He was bound over, by every solemnity the commissioners could think of, to do nothing in the way of actually touching the machine till he received instructions from the whole Commission.

All these precautions proved unnecessary. Something happened that completely changed the whole aspect of affairs. Though the world was now split up in this perplexing way, many of the ordinary

routine affairs of life went on as if nothing had happened. Among these the penny post was the most conspicuous. We know that Fred had left the United States by an earlier boat than he had intended. Had he waited for the boat he had agreed to come by, he would have received a letter that had been addressed to him by Welligham on board the S.S. *Appalachia*, which vessel belonged to the same line as the *Laurentia*. The *Appalachia* was picked up off the Irish coast in the same state as the *Laurentia*. In her mail-bags was found the letter addressed to Fred. It was sent in due course to the shipping office in London, where Fred's private address was known, and thus in process of very little time the letter reached Fred himself.

For reasons of state, this letter never became public property; but it is divulging no state secret to mention that it contained a notice of Welligham's change of address, necessitated by Frisaine's increased activity. But, further, it contained (in the ingenious cipher invented by Welligham, and known only to Welligham and Fred) a full and intelligible description of the machine, and how to use it. Full directions were also given for the manufacture of the charge for the machine, which turned out to be not panergon

at all, but a much simpler and more workable substance.

Welligham had had an idea that an attempt was about to be made on his life, and was anxious that his secret should be in the hands of some one who would see to it that Britain and not France should profit by it.

Welligham was wrong in supposing that Frisaine had any immediate intentions on his life. He was even more astray in his fear that the Frenchman would discover the secret of the new will-machine. The two were working at totally different things. What Welligham held to be of vital importance was a theory that Frisaine did not trouble his head about ; while the theory that Frisaine was trying to work out had been reduced to practice by Welligham for several years. The important thing was that Frisaine had been misled by interpreting some of Welligham's results as referring to the older theory, while they really referred to the newer. This mistake so completely threw Frisaine off the right track that he had spent years of fruitless toil in a direction in which there never had been any chance of success. Had he contented himself with using his own clever brains, without employing unfair means, the chances

are that he would have hit upon the true theory for himself.

When Fred had translated the letter into plain English he communicated it to Brandwin, who told the commissioners that he now understood how to work the machine, but suggested that the secret of the machine should not be communicated to even the Commission, lest it might possibly leak out. It was far too dangerous a secret to let the world into. The Commission were not too well pleased with this proposal, but they compromised matters by referring the whole matter to the Cabinet. Their work was, in fact, finished. They had found out how the machine worked. It was said to be so easily managed that, as the advertisements say, "a child could work it." All the same, it was suggested by the Commission that Fred should be the first to proceed to the work. It was safer that way.

The Cabinet acted promptly. A wire was sent over to France that the lines of death were about to be lifted, and suggesting that experiments should be made there to verify the removal at a certain hour.

Fred accordingly proceeded to Warpinger's Lane, where he scrupulously carried out all Welligham's instructions. It was a little disappointing to find

that nothing whatever happened in the room where the machine was; but the telegrams that came pouring into the government offices a few minutes later more than made up for the lack of effect on the spot. France went wild with delight at being once more a united nation. It is true that their delight was tempered by anger at the sufferings they had undergone, for which Britain was clearly to blame. Already plans for vengeance were forming in the minds of the more bitter among them, when a message from the British government roused the wildest indignation throughout France. It was a plain demand to disarm. The Frenchmen could not believe their senses. It seemed to them such a combination of impudence and absurdity that they did not know whether to be contemptuous or indignant. They soon made up their minds to be neither. They learned that the same command—for it amounted to nothing else—had been given to all the cabinets and councils of the world. The message ran that all armies must be disbanded, leaving only enough trained men under arms to serve for the effective police supervision of the countries. Forty-eight hours were given for assent to be received. Those nations that refused would be at once isolated by lines of death. It was stated that

as the presence of these lines would involve great danger to life, due notice would be given of the exact date at which they would be laid down. In case any nation became actively hostile towards another, the penalty would be that the attacking nation would have lines of death drawn through every ten miles of it, thus paralyzing not only war but commerce.

The unanimous protest of the world against this high-handed proceeding of Britain, and the World Meeting that afterwards followed at London, are mere matters of history. But it is necessary for us to tell how Fred fared in what followed.

He is now in his own person not only the British army but the French, German, Russian, and all the other armies of the world rolled into one. He is, in fact, all the army that there is anywhere. He represents physical force. It is true that there are appointed along with him three old gentlemen, who have been told how the machine works, and how the force is generated. When one of the old men dies he is to be succeeded by another, who is then to be told the secret of the machine and the force. There will thus be always four persons who know how to work the machine, and only four. Indeed, after Fred dies there are to be only three. The office of

keeper of the great machine has already become perhaps the most honourable in the world, and must always be committed only to the best and most honourable men in the British Empire.

Fred, however, does the practical part of the work in the meantime. This consists in keeping the machine in good repair, and ready for service. It is thought to be safer that this work should be in the hands of the man who wears that ring; for the mineralogists have made nothing of their attempts to make another ring, and, to tell the truth, the British are in no special hurry to have the secret of the ring discovered, and have, in fact, forbidden all further examination of the ring.

The treatment of Frisaine is not perhaps exactly fair. He is kept a close prisoner. Naturally, he is well provided with everything that he can desire—everything except freedom. He writes a very great deal, and it appears to be more than likely that he really understands more about this wonderful force than even the keepers of the machine. It is for this reason that he must be kept a close prisoner. Many people, indeed, recommend the strong measure of putting him to death, as a standing menace to the empire; but, at his age, he cannot last long now,

and it is not in keeping with British notions to purchase safety at such a price. Yet, since he was found one day with the full use of his arms, and was able to restore the use of Forrester's arm, it was felt that he could not be trusted with liberty. He has already cured all the cases of partial disablement that have been brought before his notice from France and Spain. Some people even hint that he could go farther, and revive those who have lost their lives altogether; but no one encourages this speculation, as it has a terribly unsettling tendency.

Frisaine is not encouraged to find an antidote to this wonderful machine that has banished the possibility of war from the earth. Naturally, all other nations have not quite this view. Indeed, at the great World Meeting at which universal disarmament was decided upon, it was very plausibly argued that the safety of the world and the maintenance of law and order would be better intrusted to a committee of representatives from all the nations of the earth; but our rulers refused, on the ground that they knew of no place where law and order were safer than under the Union Jack.

THE END.



